

Ibsen's Piano

A Cultural and Literary Analysis of *A Doll House*,
Hedda Gabler and *John Gabriel Borkman* from
the Perspective of the Piano as a Visual and
Auditory Element in the Plays

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Master's Thesis in Ibsen Studies
Centre for Ibsen Studies, Faculty of Humanities

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IV

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1. INTRODUCTION

*Just as the millet farmer picks out for his trial plot
The heaviest seeds and the poet
The exact words for his verse so
She selects the objects to accompany
Her characters*

Thus Berthold Brecht celebrates the object in dramatic literature in his poem *Weigel's Props* (as quoted in Mumford 2009:134). The objects accounted for in a dramatic text reveal more than attention to detail. It is, rather, attention to meaning. In theatre art, the actual becomes the virtual; the real object is transformed in the imagination of the reader and the spectator alike.

If such a metamorphosis is one of the accomplishments of the theatrical poet, critics have paid it little attention. "Physical objects have received short shrift in the study of drama", finds Andrew Sofer in *The Stage Life of Props*: "[o]ne would expect to find more attention paid to props by theater practitioners than by literary critics" (2003:iv). This is especially true in the "realistic" drama climaxed by the major prose works of Henrik Ibsen. Even though Ibsen's dramatic art is well-known for its "effect of the fourth wall" by which the reader virtually enters into the hidden intimate spaces of a house, the major critical approaches have been focused on the credible mimetic presentation of the *subjects*, rather than *objects* in those spaces. In such subject-oriented criticism, concludes Sofer, "stage objects either remain at the bottom of the hierarchy of theatrical elements deemed worthy of analysis [...] or else drop out of critical sight altogether" (ibid.).

The principal reason why Ibsen critics and literary scholars in general have given such a low status to *objects* in relation to *subjects* is, in my opinion, since most meanings of the dramatic text rest in the *dialogues* – the characters' replicas. *Muteness* is the objects' defining feature, and for critics, apparently, their biggest drawback. However, James H. Clancy in 1972 registers a growing interest in Ibsen's "non-verbal poetic language" which is

[C]omposed more than words [its vocabulary and syntax including] silence as well as sounds, movement, stillness, darkness, light, color, pattern, action and object: all the multifarious effects of sense and mind that play upon the human imagination and allow it to create an essential, a virtual act (Clancy 1972:65-66).

According to the critic, objects in Ibsen's dramas do possess a kind of language. There are, however, props in Ibsen's oeuvre that, in the moment when being handled by a character in the play, become animated – they really gain a *voice*. Thereby, they occupy an uneasy, but consequently highly interesting position between their essential “objectness” and a metamorphosed vitality. Such an object is, I believe, *the piano*, and the moment of its animation – instances when a character plays on it.

Topic

I will in this study concentrate on this transcendent object as it appears in three plays by Henrik Ibsen: *A Doll House* (1879), *Hedda Gabler* (1890) and *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896). I will analyze them from the perspective of the piano's double nature of both a “non-verbal”, essentially *visual* object, and an *auditory* object adorned with a “voice”. I will also observe it, as well as at the moment of its animation, as formal dramatic tools.

Basic Questions

Hence, the basic questions that I will address are:

- How can we interpret the presence of a pianoforte in Ibsen's plays?
- To which purpose does Ibsen use this instrument in his prose dramas?
- What symbolic, psychological, cultural or sociological meanings may it possess?
- Finally, how are we to interpret the music from this instrument? Why and when is it played? Who is playing it? Does it, and in what way, advance the plot of the play?

Therefore, the overall question that I will seek to answer in this thesis is: What is the role (or roles) of the piano and piano music in the three Ibsen's plays?

Sources and Aim of the Study

In *A Doll House*, Nora dances to the music of the tarantella played on the piano in the end of the second act. In *Hedda Gabler*, the piano is moved during the course of the drama, and is finally played on at its very end. In *John Gabriel Borkman*, the piano is not only a conspicuous prop, but its music seems to greatly affect all characters in the play and seems crucial as a binding element in the structure of the drama, beginning in the first, and ending in the second act.

Admittedly, the Wangel household in *The Lady from the Sea* (1888) also contains a piano, but here it never transcends its “objectness” – it is never played on. One reads of piano

music at the ball in Werle's villa in *The Wild Duck* (1884), but this music remains only as a backdrop. Only in the aforementioned prose dramas does the piano become such a metamorphosed object, which is, consequently, the reason why only these three dramas are subject of my study. Also, apart from making a few brief references, I will not analyze the productions of Ibsen's drama. The aim of my study is to make an interdisciplinary analysis of the plays, seeking to reveal how a larger nineteenth-century socio-cultural context underlies Ibsen's use of the motifs of piano and piano music.

Theory

As a point of departure I will take Brian Johnston's idea of objects as "visual metaphors" from his essay on "The Metaphoric Structure of *The Wild Duck*" by which Ibsen "[w]ith a Shakespearean complexity and depth [is] supplementing verbal metaphors" (1965:73). I will also draw on the research done by Clancy (op.cit.) and John Northam's 1953 *Ibsen's Dramatic Method*. Northam maintains that "Ibsen presents his characters not only through dialogue but also through the suggestiveness of visual details contained in his visually important stage-directions" (11). Moreover, according to Northam, visual suggestions not only supplement the dialogue as a means of portraying complex personalities, but also add unspoken information beyond realism (12). By this "unspoken information", the critic understands the established nineteenth-century cultural codes and ideologies.

These critics, however, rarely benefit from the theories which systematize the "unspoken information" that the objects convey, but which the (Ibsen's contemporary probably more than the twenty-first-century) reader intuitively comprehends. The works of French sociologists Jean Baudrillard and Pierre Bourdieu who have, from different perspectives, analyzed the paradigms of everyday objects, will, therefore, be important to me.

In *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Bourdieu's main premise is that culture, as a human institution, is made of ideas, beliefs and actions that a group is sharing. Culture is, further, revealed, among other, in the group's use of physical objects:

Objects, even industrial products, are not objective in the ordinary sense of the word, i.e., independent of the interest and tastes of those who perceive them, and they do not impose the self-evidence of a universal, unanimously approved meaning (1984:100).

"Taste classifies and it classifies the classifier," is Bourdieu's famous postulate. "Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make" (5-6). Bourdieu's study by which he tries to "grasp the logic whereby the social

relations [are] objectified in things” (77) will prove crucial for my work when analyzing what role the piano may have as a sign of the social status and relations in Ibsen’s dramas. For,

[N]othing more clearly affirms one’s ‘class’, nothing more infallibly classifies, than tastes in music. This is of course, because, by virtue of the rarity of the conditions for acquiring the corresponding dispositions, there is no more ‘classificatory’ practice than concert-going or playing a ‘noble’ instrument (18).

I will also rely on the conclusions in Baudrillard’s early work, *The System of Objects* (1968). He establishes a “more or less consistent system of meanings that objects institute” – a “*spoken system of objects*” (4). Since, to paraphrase Baudrillard, an important element in my study will be to find out how the piano is experienced: what needs other than functional ones it answers, what mental structures are interwoven with – and contradict – its functional structures, or what cultural, intracultural or transcultural system underpins its directly experienced everydayness (4). His theories will present an important foundation for my analysis.

The piano is a prominent visual detail in the spaces accounted for in the dramatic texts. Also, the particular moments of interaction between the characters and the piano occur in one specific domestic space. Critics have dedicated considerable attention to the *spaces* in Ibsen’s dramas. In his introduction to *A Doll House*, the translator, Rolf Fjelde has noticed that “through three consecutive acts the unchanging walls of the Helmers’ apartment take on the figurative quality of a prison” (Fjelde 1978:122). The other drama whose protagonist “is as hermetically cut off from the outdoors and the natural world” is, in Fjelde’s opinion, *Hedda Gabler* (ibid.). However, the action of *John Gabriel Borkman* also evolves within such prison-like nineteenth-century domestic space – its protagonist being wilfully isolated within one single room during eight years, furnished with a piano.

In his socio-cultural analysis of Ibsen’s plays, most notably *Den umulige friheten: Henrik Ibsen og moderniteten* from 2006, and “Closed Rooms and Open Dreams” from 2001, Helge Rønning has specifically explored a particularly modern motif which underlies Ibsen’s prose dramas. Namely, that Ibsen’s characters feel lethally entrapped within their homes, with very little hope of transcending this space. As a significant part of my study, I will, like Rønning, inquire into the nineteenth-century context of this ambiguous feeling of “homeliness” in the dramas. In the rooms belonging to the architectural style of the nineteenth century Ibsen’s characters are, according to Rønning, bound to make up dreams about open spaces in order to “compensate for an existence in closed rooms without exits” (2001:431). Rønning points out that

It is more than a stage trick when Ibsen lets his characters in several of the plays move through a door from the living room to the office or the study – from the woman's domain to the man's. It is an expression of structures of feeling that were part of bourgeois life in the nineteenth century – in psychology, in literature and architecture (2001:428).

Asbjørn Aarseth dedicated special attention to spaces in Ibsen (1999), concluding, pretty much like Rønning, that “[g]jennom Ibsens samtidsskuespill går det en klar grens, både bokstavelig og tematisk, mellom uteliv og inneliv” (68). The critic has inquired into how spaces and movements of the characters in Ibsen relate to the social and moral conflicts exposed in the dialogues (222); finding that Ibsen's protagonists long for an escape from the claustrophobic spaces they are “confined” to. He finds that the feeling of entrapment becomes more acute in Ibsen's later dramas and that this is precisely revealed in the scenography which progressively becomes a perfected system of “eloquent signs and devices” (333).

As a continuation and supplementation to the critics' work, I will try to trace if, and how, the nineteenth-century ideologies of domesticity, gender and private versus public are ingrained in one specific object: the piano, as well as in the moments of the characters' particular use of it.

Providing this thesis with a crucial cultural-historical background will be the studies of nineteenth-century private life from the comprehensive *A History of Private Life* by Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby, as well as Orvar Löfgren's analysis of the development of the bourgeois lifestyle in nineteenth-century Sweden in his “The Sweetness of Home” (1984) and *Den kultiverade människan* (1979). However, the most important theoretical foundation for the cultural part of my analysis will be the two works by Richard Sennett where he discusses the *causes* and *effects* of the nineteenth-century rapid societal transformation and the subsequent reign of bourgeois ideologies: *The Conscience of the Eye* (1990) and *The Fall of the Public Man* (1993).

Sources and Methodology

Piano is, however, not only a mute object in the plays. At a particular moment it is “brought to life” – it becomes a site of an interactive musical performance. I will also inquire into the motif of piano music from its sociohistorical context. I will, namely, look into how class and gender assumptions of the age are impressed in the moments when characters interact with the piano. Arthur Loesser's comprehensive sociohistorical analysis of the piano will present the general background for my analysis, whereas for a particularly Norwegian perspective I will rely on Peter Andreas Kjeldsberg's *Piano i Norge, “Et uundværligt Instrument”* (1985).

In his book entitled *Men, Women and Pianos, A Social History*, Loesser describes the history and the cultural evolution of the piano which eventually became the “most respectable of all instruments” in nineteenth-century bourgeois Europe (1954:250). He explains how pianoforte surpassed all other keyboard instruments to become the most popular instrument as well as a status symbol. “The ideal”, Loesser writes, “was a complete room lavishly stocked with imposing satin-covered upholstery, ormolu mantelware, brocaded hangings, and crystal chandeliers – which no human being was ever expected to live in” (247). Such an “ostentation chamber was more than likely to contain a purely symbolic grand pianoforte, beautiful but dumb” (ibid.). Further, in his research, Loesser shows how the pianoforte and its music became part of the age’s gender restrictions, giving a fascinating examination of the “scientific” theories underlying musical ideologies. Max Weber’s short aphorism “The History of the Piano” will also reveal the unperceived politicization of the instrument and its music, which I intend to trace in the chosen three plays.

Many Ibsen critics have dedicated special attention to the moments in the dramas when the piano is played on, rarely, however, reading those scenes in the larger context of the nineteenth-century ideas on music and the age’s gendered institution of piano playing. The interpretations range from those concentrating on the particular metaphoric meanings of the piano pieces, or instances which serve to deepen the psychological portraying of the characters, protagonists in particular. These aspects will not be neglected in my analysis, but I will also concentrate on tracing the deeper connections with the age’s ideologies which underlie the instances of piano-playing in the dramas.

Nora’s tarantella has been in special focus of nearly any critic of *A Doll House*. It has been interpreted through the dialectics of the Italian folk tradition of tarantism: Sandra Colella wrote her master’s thesis in 2007 entitled: *Tarantism and Tarantella in “A Doll’s House”*.¹ She continued the research done in 1948 by Daniel Haakonsen and Arve Nordland in 2006 article. Erik Østerud, traces the aspects of carnivalism in the tarantella-scene (2006). What the critics fail to pursue, however, is the socio-historical context, and the politics of piano music. It is never questioned if Nora’s “instrument for healing and normalization” (Colella 2007:93) might at the same time be the object that directly symbolizes Nora’s bond to her class and gender.

¹ I will refer to Rolf Fjelde’s translations of Ibsen’s dramas from *The Complete Major Prose Plays*. Although the possessive: *A Doll’s House* seems to be the more common translation, Fjelde chooses the form *A Doll House* trying to retain a “universality of reference” which was, according to the translator, Ibsen’s aim (Ibsen 1978:121).

The *ritual* aspects of the scenes at the piano in these dramas will never be far from my focus. However, this particular scene will be primarily analyzed from Nora's historically defined gender and social frames, as they are epitomized in the object and music of the piano. I will discuss the viewpoints of the Ibsen critics (Rekdal 2000,) who find that the tarantella is the point when Nora "undergoes a full transformation" (Rekdal 2000:44, Langås 2005). By focusing on the particular circumstances of Nora's dance, I will, in line with Toril Moi's standpoints from the 2006 article "First and Foremost a Human Being: Idealism, Theatre and Gender in *A Doll's House*" seek to find how the tarantella establishes "Nora's own unquestioned commitment to the traditional understanding of women's place in the world" (274).

In the extensive criticism concerning *Hedda Gabler*, there are, generally speaking, two main separate perspectives: one emphasizing the psychological (or psychoanalytical) and the other socio-cultural aspects of the play (Rekdal 2001:12). Both perspectives will be equally important for me and I will interrelate them. The piano and the "wild dance tune" Hedda plays have not yet been given a separate studious analysis. The presence and moving of Hedda's piano, as well as her particular attachment to the object, have been rather recently acknowledged as important motifs in the play. In her 2001 article entitled "Sjølvmord og Ibsens Hedda Gabler", Mary Kay Norseng finds that the removing of the piano in the beginning of the drama's second act, "det einaste møbelet som var hennar", implies that Hedda herself is soon going to be removed (222). I will further inquire into the possible identification between the protagonist and her piano which is only suggested by the critic.

Analyzing the play from its nineteenth-century social context, critics emphasize Hedda's misplacement in the moment of the dramatic action (Rekdal (2001), Rønning (1973), Aarseth (1999), Durbach (1971) et al.). Hedda is seen as a person "forankret i det fortidige, i den tapte tid. Pistolene, pianoet og portretter av general Gabler – er arven hun bringer med seg inn i nåtiden" (Rekdal 2001:183). Erik Østerud finds that Ibsen "setter *hele samfunnet* på scenen" in the drama (2001). The critic suggests that small motifs, and among them Hedda's piano, might be important indicators which reflect the social transformation of the Norwegian nineteenth-century society:

[P]lasseringen av Heddas piano, den rette belysningen i stuen, bruk eller ikke bruk av varetrekk på møblene [...] er alt sammen detaljer, tilsynelatende små og uskyldige ting, men allikevel betydningsfulle i denne beklemthetens historie, som egentlig handler om at hver enkelt av de tre kultgruppene kjemper om det samme territorium (Østerud 2001:134).

Relying on the piano's values as object, I will inquire into the psychological characterization of the protagonist as it is revealed in the moment of playing. This will be in continuation of Astrid Sæther's idea that "the text embodies a suggestion of alternative areas of activity for Hedda. This is linked precisely to art, music and writing – 'the poetic'" (2001:441). Sæther traces elements in Hedda's character which correspond to Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy on the Dionysian from *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). I will further this method, but will also try to place Hedda's piano playing within the larger context of nineteenth-century thoughts on music, and thus establish Ibsen's position in relation to it.

Finally, my analysis of *John Gabriel Borkman* will be based on the idea that there is an auditory "sub-text" layer to the play which opens the text up to new interpretations. The idea was first offered by Sæther in her article "*Ud i den jernhaarde drømmeløse virkelighed: om Ibsens John Gabriel Borkman*" (1993:29). After inquiring into the socio-cultural and psychological context of the piano as an object in this drama, I will observe it as an auditory dramatic tool. A dialogue with Mark B. Sandberg will be opened, who suggested that piano music is the drama's particular "continuity device", otherwise commonly used in the cinematic tradition (2006).

Indeed, the lone piano in John Gabriel Borkman's dwelling sounds with *Danse Macabre*, inflicting different reactions to the characters of the play. I will inquire into the reasons why this one particular musical piece is used in the text, intending to trace how this affects the different character's responses to it. This will bring me into a discussion with the many critics who have previously analyzed the metaphoric qualities of this motif.

In 1994, Kamilla Aslaksen wrote her MA thesis particularly focusing on the metaphoric context of the *Danse Macabre*. Like Frode Helland, in his *Melankoliens spill* (2000), she suggests that the metaphoric discourse of *Danse Macabre* may, in fact, be the play's underlying metaphor. I would like to continue their analysis, also expanding the focus to the other characters in the play. Secondly, I will inquire further into whether its essentially morbid death-related dialectics also can imply a positive, life-bringing futurity.

Very recently, two studies have been published aiming at pin-pointing Ibsen's use of music, however, from two essentially dissimilar approaches. Nils Grinde conducted a comprehensive historiographic study concerning the music used in the earliest productions of Ibsen's plays, as well as discussing Ibsen's biographical data about his relation to music, in his *Ibsen og musikken; Musikken i Henrik Ibsens liv og verker* from 2008. On the other hand,

Atle Kittang's approach was text-based. In his 2006 article "Hedda – troll og tragisk skikkelse" the critic acknowledges that instances of Ibsen's use of piano and piano music in his mature opus have similar patterns. He finds that Hedda's wild dance melody brings associations to Nora's tarantella and John Gabriel Borkman's *Danse Macabre*. Regrettably, the critic never analyzes this parallelism any deeper.

Thus, my contribution to Ibsen criticism will consist in observing the motif of piano and piano music in Ibsen's dramas as a cycle, and not as three isolated instances. I will, thus, observe how this motif develops alongside the development of Ibsen's dramatic art, as well as how it, in turn, reflects the general transformation of the society and intellectual thought of the age. Hence, an interdisciplinary approach is essential, for only by using a multitude of sources, can this peculiar object, and its music, be fully analyzed and thus set the three Ibsen's plays within their age's aesthetic climate. My thesis, will present yet another instance of integrating Ibsen, and Ibsen scholarship, into the wider body of nineteenth-century literary criticism. For some time now, it has shown growing interest in the interdisciplinary studies of the literature-music connections – "[n]ineteenth-century novels brimming with scenes at the piano" (Clapp-Itnyre 2002:xv).

Design

My analyses of the three dramas will have a parallel structure. By constantly retaining essentially four perspectives, I will trace how the visual and subsequently auditory motif of the piano evolves from one drama to the next. First, I will focus on the piano as a visually perceptible yet assumedly metaphoric *object*. Second, I will expand the focus to the whole *space* in which the object is placed, in order to trace how characters' actions are rooted in the age's gender and behavior scripts. Third, I will observe the particular transformation of the piano from an inherently visual to an auditory motif as Ibsen's *dramatic tool*. Finally, I will concentrate on the scenes when this particular transformation occurs, investigating whether this also entails a transformation of the subjects playing. Within this fourth perspective, the crucial lines that I will follow are: music as a transgression of the characters' gender, or socio-cultural background, the ritualistic and metaphoric aspects of the dances played on the piano conflation of death and vitality.

My thesis will be divided into four chapters. In the first chapter, I will discuss Ibsen's use of music and musical instruments in his dramas in general. The other three chapters will

respectively consist of analyses of *A Doll House*, *Hedda Gabler* and *John Gabriel Borkman* (respectively).

I will, therefore, start by contesting what seems to be a rather widespread belief that Ibsen “was personally not musical, if one disregards his excellent sense of rhythm” (Haakonsen 2003:233), that he had a “poorly developed musicality” (Hjemdahl 2006:212), which Grieg and other Ibsen’s contemporaries may account for (Grinde 2008:11, 43), and which was, finally, an image fostered by Ibsen himself (Henrik Ibsens skrifter 2005:414), and his biographers (Koht 1954:272). Although Ibsen might not have been an eager concert-goer, his dramas testify that he had a keen sense for the potentials music could have in dramatic art.

2. MUSIC IN IBSEN

In his early plays, Ibsen makes extensive use of music. Even his first drama, *Catiline*, loosely dated around 1850, has musical sections. In the second act, a “drinking song” is intended to be sung by a male choir. Music is a prominent component in all Ibsen’s plays written before his first “contemporary” drama: *Pillars of Society* from 1877. It would seem that once Ibsen stopped writing dramas on historical or romantic themes, his use of music in the dramas changed as well. Harps are heard in *The Warrior’s Barrow* (1850). Choirs sing in his early dramas such as *Catiline* (1850), *Saint John’s Eve* (1852), *Olaf Liljekrans* (1856). Bishop Nicholas desperately hopes for salvation by ordering eight monks to sing by his death-bed, and Margrete’s lullaby for Haakon is a rare lyrical moment in *The Pretenders* (1863), which does not immediately strike the reader with its musicality.

For the first performance of *Peer Gynt* Ibsen himself asked Edvard Grieg to compose the accompanying music. On the 23rd of January 1874, Ibsen writes a letter to Grieg asking him whether he would make music for his drama: “*Peer Gynt* [...] agter jeg at indrette til opførelse på scenen. Vil De komponere den dertil fornødne musik?” (Henrik Ibsens Skrifter 2008:175). One word in this letter is crucial for the understanding of the role of music in Ibsen’s *early* dramas, and that is “fornødne”, or “necessary”. Why would music be a necessary element in the performance of his play?

The rather recently published book by Nils Grinde *Ibsen og musikken* answers this question by pointing towards the evolving nineteenth-century theatre practice. In the study, the author has done extensive research on the musical pieces composed for and accompanying some of the first performances of Ibsen’s plays. He has also briefly accounted for the existing musical elements in the dramas. According to Grinde, probably the most important reason why many of Ibsen’s early works contain so many musical passages is because of the singspiel tradition. Singspiel is a music-drama characterized by the alternation between spoken dialogues and songs, ballads, and arias. This was also the most popular genre in the Norwegian theatres at the time.

Relying on the research done by Alf H. Henriksen, Grinde shows that 77% of all performances between 1850 and 1877 in *Christiania Theater*, i.e. Oslo’s most important theatre at the time, were singspiels, or vaudevilles (Grinde 2008:13). Opera was the next most popular genre. As Grinde points out, *Christiania Theater*, like all bigger nineteenth-century

European theatres, had its orchestra playing during operas, singspiels as well as spoken dramas (13). Therefore, when Ibsen used musical elements in the plays, he was simply following the fashion of the time. Indeed, if one agrees with Grinde in calling Ibsen's early plays "syngespillpregete", that is "singspiel-like" (40), Ibsen's use of music in the early dramas would be thus attributed to the demands of the genre.

In 1877, however, publishing *The Pillars of Society*, Ibsen takes his famous turn towards writing contemporary dramas, never again to return to the historical subject-matter. At once, the characters in his plays seem to have become silent. The final line in Ibsen's oeuvre: "I am free! I am free!" is, admittedly, *sung* by Maja Rubek going down the mountain in the end of *When We Dead Awaken* (1899). Other than that, rarely does a character in his contemporary dramas sing. Even Maja's song can be interpreted more like an illusion than a real song. The musical elements in his later dramas seem to have become scarcer indeed. However, whereas music in Ibsen's early dramas went alongside the text, and consisted usually of a lyrical passage Ibsen included due to the traditional specificities of the genre, in the contemporary dramas, music "often functions as a dramatic indication, or symbol for the central ideas of the play" (Grinde 2008:40). As such, music was an integrated and essential element of the dramatic action. Therefore, its importance paradoxically seems to be bigger than in the early works.

In theatres in Christiania, Norway's nineteenth-century capital, even in the last decades of the century, the usual practice was to have the orchestra playing an overture to theatre performances, between the acts and after the final fall of the curtain. In that sense, one could say that even Ibsen's contemporary plays abounded with music. This would, of course, be a valid conclusion if we were to consider performances of Ibsen's plays at the moment of their publication. However, since the attention of this study is focused on the text of the dramas, such a conclusion would not hold true. Moreover, it is important to note that not all Ibsen's contemporary dramas were performed with musical interludes.

Ibsen himself urged that one of his dramas should be performed entirely without any musical elements, including the orchestra. In the reply to a Swedish director who asked Ibsen for advice regarding the staging of *Ghosts* in 1883 (written in 1881), the latter particularly insisted that there should be no music accompanying the acting: "Selvfølgelig må der intet andet gives hverken før eller efter stykket. Helst skulde jeg også ønske at dette mit arbejde overalt blev spillet uden benyttelse af orkester, hverken før forestillingen eller mellem

akterne.” (Ibsen to August Lindberg 19 August 1883, Ibsen 1946:522). The dramatist was fully aware of the effect auditory components had in a performance. Thus, there could be no doubt that the inclusion of such components *in* the text of the drama itself is a purposeful device aiming to achieve some kind of effect, or effects.

Ghosts was, as far as we know, the only Ibsen’s drama devoid of musical elements even in this widest sense (Grinde 2008). It is also one of the four, out of twelve, contemporary dramas without any clear references to music or musical elements in the text. The other ones are *Rosmersholm*, *An Enemy of the People* and *Little Eyolf*.² In all other dramas written from 1877 (*Pillars of Society*) to 1899 (*When We Dead Awaken*), Ibsen includes music and other auditory elements in the texts.

What are the instruments used in Ibsen’s contemporary dramas? As we have seen, human voice, songs (sometimes folksongs) dominate in the early works. In *The Pillars of Society*, there is music from a parade, tarantella is played on the piano in *A Doll’s House* (1879), Hjalmar Ekdal plays a flute, whereas dance music is played on the piano on Hakon Werle’s dinner party in *The Wild Duck* (1884). In *The Lady from the Sea* (1888) brass music is heard in the background when Elida and the Stranger meet, Hedda Gabler plays a “wild dance melody” on her piano in the play of the same name (1890), and the future pianist Frida Foldal plays “Danse Macabre” to John Gabriel Borkman (1896). Finally, Maya’s song echoes in the mountains and ends the play *When We Dead Awaken*, and thereby Ibsen’s dramatic opus.

The piano is, thus, evidently the dominating instrument in Ibsen’s contemporary dramas, clearly replacing the human voice from the early Ibsen. It is played in four, namely in *A Doll’s House*, *The Wild Duck*, *Hedda Gabler* and *John Gabriel Borkman*, and it is in the stage descriptions for the fifth: *The Lady from the Sea*. The piano is, in turn, noticeably absent in Ibsen’s historical dramas. I interpret this exchange as the playwright’s deliberate step in his technique which aimed at making the dramas (from 1877 onwards) credible and “natural” to his readers and audiences. Ibsen says in the correspondence with the theatre producer August Lindberg: “Stykkets virkning afhænger for en stor del deraf at tilskuerne synes de sidder og hører og ser på noget, som går for sig ute i selve det virkelige liv” (2. August 1883, Ibsen 1946:520).

² Daniel Haakonsen argues that when Rosmer and Rebekka go towards the millrace, its sound marks the ending of the play (2003:236-238). However, it is arguable to what extent the reader would be aware of this implicit sound.

Discussing the role of music in Ibsen's prose plays, Haakonsen finds that music in Ibsen's late dramatic works does not seem to point too far (2003:233). In this thesis I would argue to the contrary. The recurring of the piano in a number of contemporary dramas is in itself a clear indication that this seemingly "innocent" stage prop could be a bearer of different meanings and functions which derive from its complex nature of being both a visual and an auditory element in the plays.

3. A HOUSE WITH A PIANO: A DOLL HOUSE

3.1. INTERIOR AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

“A comfortable room, tastefully but not expensively furnished. A door to the right in the back wall leads to the entryway; another to the left leads to HELMER’s study. Between these doors, a piano” (Ibsen 1978:125). This is the beginning of Ibsen’s 1879 play: *A Doll House*. The play’s starting point is an idyllic interior of a nineteenth-century apartment. However, as the play evolves the reader experiences how this “comfortable”, cozy interior gradually transforms itself into a site of uneasiness, gloom, desperation, separation and tragedy. Indeed, as Rolf Fjelde has observed, “[t]hrough three consecutive acts the unchanging walls of the Helmer’s apartment take on the figurative quality of a prison” (Ibsen 1978:122). Rarely is the reader’s attention as immobile as in this play: it is tied to this particular space from the start until its very end. In spite of her occasional exits, the protagonist’s particular bond to this space, as well as the difficulty of tearing herself from its grips, is striking.

In her article “What did Nora do?” Unni Langås (2005) comments on how Ibsen meticulously deconstructs his female protagonist in the course of the plot. Indeed, in the end of the play, Nora becomes disillusioned regarding every law of the “appropriate way of life”, which was the foundation of her identity. She consequently realizes that she must renounce such doll-life and seek for a truer identity of a human being.

In this study, however, I propose an analysis from the opposite vantage point. Instead of focusing on the process of Nora’s revelation, I will inquire into how Ibsen constructs her character in the first place. I want to focus on the cultural and social clues Ibsen gives to the reader regarding her character as she first appears in the drama. More specifically, the implicit nineteenth-century socio-cultural codes inherent in the piano from the Helmer salon will guide my analysis.

Apparently insignificant elements, such as pieces of furniture, gestures and movement of the characters in the space are all carrying significant meanings. They provide the dialogues and the drama as a whole with meanings which the isolated replicas do not reveal.³ I believe that many of the ingrained “ghosts”, i.e. myths, beliefs and ideologies that underlie Nora’s character and her actions before she finally sits down with Helmer in the last act of the

³ See Durbach (1991), Østerud (1998) and Northam (1953) who specifically emphasize the importance of the drama’s visual suggestions.

play, can be deduced from the narrative of the piano. This at once visual and auditory dramatic tool stands as an emblem of the “comfortable room” Nora eventually leaves.

To explain why I believe that the piano can be seen as the epitome of “the comfortable room” which is Nora’s frame of action, I need first to look at the stage descriptions for the first act which provide the reader with a flawless peek into the nineteenth-century “tableau from private life” which is Nora’s milieu:

A comfortable room, tastefully but not expensively furnished. A door to the right in the back wall leads to the entryway; another to the left leads to HELMER’s study. Between these doors, a piano. Midway in the left-hand wall a door, and farther down a window. Near the window a round table with an armchair and a small sofa. In the right-hand wall, toward the rear, a door, and nearer the foreground a porcelain stove with two armchairs and a rocking chair beside it. Between the stove and the side door, a small table. Engravings on the walls. An étagère, with china figures and other small art objects; a small bookcase with richly bound books; the floor carpeted [...]. (Ibsen 1978:125)

The description of the room is important, since the action of the drama entirely takes place in *this very space*. Why does Ibsen present the reader with such a detailed account of the room, listing all the possible objects which surround his characters? In other words, how is one to interpret the presence of a piano in this room?

“[A] fire burning in the stove. It is a winter day.” A young woman comes in “humming happily to herself”, carrying “an armload of packages”. Through the hall door, “a delivery boy is seen, holding a Christmas tree and a basket, which he gives to the maid who let them in” (125). What an idyllic setting! The reader has to let out an “ahh” and just like doctor Rank in Ibsen’s earlier draft for *A Doll House* say: “[i]t’s just right [...] nice and comfortable, as always” (Ibsen 1961:314).

Ibsen presents us with a tableau illustrating the nineteenth-century myth of a “sweet home”. This myth was one of the pillar myths in the ideology of the rising bourgeois culture (Löfgren 1984). The other one was “happy family”. In this play, Ibsen presents these two myths, relies on them and subsequently deconstructs them.

“Home was like a snug sheltered theatre box, from which the family looked at the stage of the busy outside world”, says Orvar Löfgren in his article “The Sweetness of Home” (1984:49). The multitude of small chairs, sofas, tables and rocking chairs are meant to create the mythical feeling of “home”. There, the hostess makes the guests feel comfortable as: “the conversation [...] cover[s] thousands of topics, all the time drawing its inspiration from the surroundings”, as a contemporary handbook of interior decoration instructs (qtd. in Löfgren 1984:49). “Empty tables, naked walls, bare surfaces,” continues the instruction, “can in no

way be tolerated in the drawing-room. The chilly atmosphere would counteract the warmth of the welcoming” (ibid.). The reader observes that the Helmer family has a carpet, which is deeply admired by doctor Rank in the draft to *A Doll House*:

DR. RANK. My word, just look at this new carpet. Congratulations! Well now, what about a nice carpet like that, for instance? Is that a luxury? I say, no it isn't. A carpet like that pays for itself, ladies. With a carpet like that under one's feet, one has finer and sublimer thoughts, nobler feelings than one would have in a comfortless room with cold creaking boards. Especially where there are children in the house. (Ibsen 1961:299)

This ovation to Helmer's carpet is not kept in the final version of the play. In the draft, Ibsen is directly ridiculing nineteenth-century manuals of etiquette which proliferated during that period, such as, for example Silvio Pellico's *On the Duties of Man* from 1855. In the final version of the drama, Ibsen is much more subtly showing the hollowness of such a “tableau” of a home. In it, we do not read an ennobled homage to a piece of furniture. What Ibsen, however, provides us with are clues which point to the nineteenth-century cultural climate. Let us focus on the piano which is lacking in the stage description in the named draft for *A Doll House* (1879) (Ibsen 1961:289-340), and see what possible cultural connotations and codes are suggested by its presence.

Nora: Middle Class or Bourgeoisie?

In the Ibsen criticism concerning *A Doll House*, there is a subtle, yet notable disagreement concerning the social class Ibsen's Nora belongs to. Fjelde calls the Helmer's residence “a complacent, middle-class home” (Ibsen 1978:120), similarly, Terry Eagleton finds that Ibsen is generally writing about the middle class, thus also including the characters of *A Doll House* (2008:10). Helge Rønning, however, is among the critics who decidedly place the Helmer family within the bourgeoisie (2007).

Is this merely a matter of terminology, or do the terms: “bourgeoisie” and “middle class” in fact have a different denotation in the nineteenth-century Norway?

According to the Norwegian historian Jan Eivind Myhre's article “The Middle Classes of Norway, 1840-1940”, Norwegian nineteenth-century society was relatively unique compared to other West European societies. Even though it was undergoing a equally comprehensive social transformation in accord to other societies in Europe (2004:103) at the time when Ibsen was writing *A Doll House*, a “contemporary tragedy” (Ibsen 1961:368). Myhre's argument relies on the fact that, among other things, Norway lacked nobility and

peasants in the usual sense of the word (106-107). Nobility, as we know it from Victorian England or Austro-Hungarian Empire practically did not exist. It was abolished in 1821, but was already negligible by this time. Senior civil servants, even though their importance gradually diminished during the course of the century, operated as Norwegian *Ersatz Aristokratie*, its social, political and cultural elite (Myhre 2004:108, Danielsen 1995). Senior civil servants (*embetsmenn*) belonged to the bourgeoisie who, together with the lumber- and metal-exporting magnates, were called *de kondisjonerte* – the cultural elite (Myhre 103-145).

However, during the course of the century, the traditional cultural elite of senior civil servants was gradually waning, being replaced by the educational bourgeoisie after the political change in 1884. Together with the “people from the professional groups, private lawyers [...] civil engineers, as well as managers in large companies” they could be considered carriers of the dominant culture (117).⁴ On the other hand, “middle class” was recruited among lower public officials, shop assistants, clerks (114).

Without going any deeper into the terminologically and factually intricate formation of Norwegian society, it suffices to say that, even though the terms might be partly overlapping (see Myhre 2004), *bourgeoisie* was de facto not synonymous with *middle class* in Norway in the nineteenth century.

Let us now come back to the initial dilemma. The year is 1869, Ibsen publishes his “contemporary tragedy”. Whose contemporariness is he presenting? A middle-class one or a bourgeois one?

The Piano as distinctive “musical furniture”

Already in the opening to *A Doll House*, Ibsen gives us one important clue to the solution of the dilemma. It is “[a] *comfortable room, tastefully but not expensively furnished. A door to the right in the back wall leads to the entryway; another to the left leads to HELMER’s study. Between these doors, a piano*” (my emphasis, Ibsen 1978:125). The piano in the room is an obvious indication that the Helmers belong to the bourgeoisie, socially and culturally.

Before grounding this statement, I will note that there are, certainly, other clues to this. For example, already from the list of characters, the reader is informed that Helmer is a lawyer, that the family has a maid and a nurse (Ibsen 1978:123). Those were commodities

⁴ See also Danielsen 1995:268-269.

affordable only to the members of the wealthier strata of the bourgeoisie (Myhre 2004:134).

According to Jean Baudrillard, objects always “say” something about their owners (Baudrillard 1996). A contemporary reader from Ibsen’s time would, thus, undoubtedly instantly interpret the Helmer family from within the specific socio-cultural context of the age. Moreover, the piano in this drama is not only a clear social marker, it establishes the specific kind of respectability the Helmers represent. The piano is at once also a tool, a symbol which the family would use to convey information on their distinct outlooks and way of life as well as their “nouveau-riche” bourgeois ideologies. The piano can function as such a socio-cultural signifier primarily due to its economic value.

A piano in the mid-nineteenth-century Norway was not an item easily obtained. As Peter Andreas Kjeldsberg points out, in his study of the establishment of the piano in Norway as the “indispensable instrument”,⁵ in the first half of the nineteenth century this instrument was reserved only to the wealthiest members of the Norwegian society. A simple comparison will reveal this: the average daily salary was 26 schillings, whereas the price of a fortepiano was 13200 schillings (1985:38). It is, thus, obvious, that possessing a piano involved much more than just having an instrument to play during long winter nights.

However, this was to be drastically changed during the second half of the century, when, like in the rest of Europe, the piano market literally exploded. This was tightly linked to the modernization of the West European societies. In his short essay “A History of the Piano”, Max Weber marks the dependence of the piano building on the “large-scale market”, and on the “mass consumption of the piano music” (Weber 1978:380) by amateurs. He attributes the piano’s symbolic status to the industrial expansion and the new consumerism. Another author who dwells on the interesting development of the piano tradition in the West, is Arthur Loesser, who in his book entitled *Men, Women and Pianos; A Social History*, gives an interesting comparison of the rise of piano sales and the growth of the population from the middle of the nineteenth century, affirming that pianos were being “made at a faster rate than new people were being born and new homes established” (Loesser 1954:429). This meant, in short, at the time when Ibsen wrote *A Doll House*, the instrument became democratized. More and more families could afford this status symbol.

Indeed, the demand for this “most respectable of all instruments” (Loesser 1954:250) became so high also in Norway, that a big piano-making factory – “Brødrene Hals’

⁵ *Piano i Norge: “Et uundværlig Instrument”*.

Pianofortefabrik” was established in the capital in the second part of the century. It was prosperous to the point that it opened the city’s first concert house rooming 700 people in Stortingsgaten (Boye 1976:119). This clearly shows how profitable piano-making business was at the time, and how important it was to obtain this acclaimed popular “status symbol”. Loesser goes as far as to claim that almost any family “that considered itself above the ‘working class’” felt impelled to buy this instrument (Loesser 1954:429). Even though this might be a bit exaggerated it remains true that the grand pianoforte that dominated the spacious salons of barons, princes and other noblemen gradually became accessible to the new-rich: merchants, professors, civil servants. In this social leap, the piano had, naturally, to undergo some radical changes of appearance so as to fit the bourgeois rooms that were not so lofty. During the later nineteenth century, this “brand of purse-pride” became rather conventional, and had to adapt to the limited floor space, since “many people who wanted the latest thing in a full-sized grand also had a lot of other furniture they wanted to put into the same room (Loesser 1954:248)”.

The interior presented in *A Doll House* is overburden with heavy furniture and small ornaments covering almost every inch of empty space that it would be, according to Walter Benjamin writing a century later, deemed only a corpse (1993:6). What Ibsen calls “a comfortable room”, Swedish anthropologist Löfgren would call “*horror vacui*” (Löfgren 1984:46), and Loesser an “ostentation chamber” (Loesser 1954:247,430).

This bric-a-brac interior testifies of the age’s fashionable interior design. It rooms: two tables, as many as three armchairs, a sofa and a rocking chair; a bookcase with “richly bound books”, a stove, an étagère full of small objects and china figurines, probably souvenirs, all of this finally wreathed with engravings on the walls and a carpet on the floor. Among this multitude of miscellaneous pieces of furniture, a piano also had to squeeze in. Such a room was considered ideal. This testifies how the nouveau-riche Helmer family invested in the extravagance of the house’s decoration.

The piano, being the nineteenth-century “thing of the moment” (Loesser 1954:424), had to be roomed in Helmer’s domestic tableau. Its mere presence was a token of the nineteenth-century well-to-do families. “To enhance a living room with a carved and shiny pianoforte costing twenty or one hundred guineas [...] seemed an easy advance toward leading the more abundant life” (259). In other words, Helmer’s parlor would simply not be complete without it. As Max Weber points out, the piano had a status of “the bourgeois

furniture” and is, as such, more than any other object in the Helmer’s home a “symbol of the bourgeois home-comforts” (Weber 1978:382). The piano is an indispensable element in Ibsen’s construction of the “sweet home” tableau in *A Doll House*.

The idealism of “sweet home”, based on the idea of intimacy and privacy, was a key symbol and the bourgeoisie’s cultural distinction. As Richard Sennett, among others, points out, in *The Conscience of the Eye*: “[t]he coming of the Industrial Revolution aroused a great longing for sanctuary [...]. Stated baldly, “home” became the secular version of spiritual refuge” (1990:21). The walls of the house were, both literally and metaphorically, meant to protect the family from “[t]he public world of the street [which] was harsh, crime ridden, cold, and above all, confused in its very complexity. The private realm sought order and clarity” (27). Bourgeois home was, thus, also a moral project, aiming to protect the inhabitants from all the evils within the society. Its ideology of haven, or sanctuary maybe finds its most poignant expression in John Ruskin’s *Sesame and Lilies*, first published in 1865: “This is the true nature of home – it is a place of peace: the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt and division. In so far as it is not this, it is not home” (Ruskin 1891:136).

The furnishing objectifies the ideology of a snug “sweet home”, but at the same time it shows off this family’s status. Every object which Ibsen accounts for in the opening of the play *represents* certain codes, conveys certain meanings to the gaze of Helmer’s visitors. All objects, and particularly such a costly one as the piano are, according to Bourdieu, “[e]xplicit aesthetic choices [...] constituted in opposition to the choices of the groups closest in social space” (1984:60). The objects are codes which tell about the owners’ particular social and cultural profile: “[t]o the socially recognized hierarchy of the [objects]”, postulates the theoretician, “corresponds a social hierarchy of the consumers” (1). Bourdieu concludes that “[t]aste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make” (4). Having a piano was indeed a powerful classifier in 1879.

The only room in the Helmer’s residence which could be adorned with this “most respectable of all instruments” was the one which functioned as the family’s “show-case to the world” – “the room which had to be decorated with great care” (Löfgren 1984:48) and be the ideological and cultural mirror of the Helmer family. This is the room where Ibsen confides Nora to. This is the room where the entire action takes place.

3.2. SALON: THE “PUBLIC” FEMININE REALM

Ibsen's text gives several clues as of the function of the particular room where *A Doll House* unfolds, the most important of which is undoubtedly the presence of such a luxurious bourgeois “status symbol” – the piano. Another important indicator is the fact that this room has as many as four doors, making it accessible from all the other rooms, as a kind of “meeting spot”. The first door to the right, leads “to the entryway”, the other to the left “to Helmer's study”. The third door leads to the nursery, and finally the fourth to the bedroom, as is revealed later on in the drama. This is, thus, beyond a doubt, Helmer's salon, “drawing room, living room, or parlor – whatever the shade of pretense with which the space was named” (Loesser 1954:430).

By definition, the parlor was “both a show-case to the world and a shelter against it” (Löfgren 1984:47), that is, it was a transitional space between the public sphere and the private space (Ariès 1991:4). It could be accessed from any other room in the house, and was designed for receiving guests. As a consequence, according to Jürgen Habermas, it could be said that it “[did] not serve the ‘house’ – but ‘society’” (1989:45).

From the second half of the nineteenth-century the new fashion in interior architecture favored the individualized and functionally partitioned and specialized apartments (Rosner 2005:8, Habermas 1989:45). Each and every room was designed for a specific activity. As Sennett articulates it in *The Conscience of the Eye*: each “family kingdom” had its “domestic duchies” divided into subjective spaces for “love, play, sociability, each with its own distinctive interior” (1990:27).

Within the strict functional division of rooms, the salon was designated for “socialization”, as opposed to for example the nursery which functioned as a play-room. The dividing walls were, however, not only physical barriers between these “domestic duchies”, more important, they separated the *private* from the *public* spheres of the home (Kerr 1891). This emphatic division between private and public was an invention of the 19th century (Sennett 1990, 1993 and Benjamin 1986), and the boundaries between them were strict. Few visitors were allowed to cross from the salon into the more intimate rooms of home.

As a result, every thing and every action which might be considered intimate and private were banned from the salon. In the parlor, “everything that should be shielded from indiscreet eyes was banished” (Ariès 1991:4). In return, it was the only room which was

subjected to the eyes of others and had to serve as the shiniest tableau of the family's wealth, position and ideology.

To every last detail the Helmer's living-room accounted of a "happy family" living the bourgeois ideology of a "sweet home". The family member responsible for keeping and maintaining this tableau was first and foremost the woman/wife (Löfgren 1984 and Frykman 1979). Within the ideology of the "happy family", the woman stands as the guardian of home and its many virtues. Indeed, it is Nora who greets the visitors and who sits and chats away in the salon, ensuring that the guest feels cozy at all times. When Mrs. Linde comes, Nora insists on making her comfortable: "There now, let's get cozy here by the stove. No, the easy chair there! I'll take the rocker here" (Ibsen 1978:130). Helmer, on the other hand, can seclude himself in the privacy of his study: when Mrs. Linde rings the doorbell, Helmer can, unlike Nora, say: "I'm not at home for visitors, don't forget" (Ibsen 1978:129).

Indeed, Nora's obligation is apparently to always be available for the visitors. According to Viktoria Rosner, who has dealt with domestic spaces in Victorian literature, "[i]t would not be considered seemly for a woman to wish to hide herself away [...] when she might be interacting with family members, servants and visitors" (Rosner 2005:95). It is, however, noteworthy that Nora has not the complete freedom of movement within the home, for she has not access to all its rooms.

She is to "steal over and listen at her husband's study door" (Ibsen 1978:125), and call her husband who "[c]an't be disturbed" (126) to come out and see what she has bought. The study is, namely, a masculine room, "associated with isolation and privacy" (Rosner 2005:64). This privacy "enables a heightened degree of autonomy" (93) for the man. Helmer, of course, can always enter Nora's realm – the salon, but not vice versa. The communication with the study takes place through a closed door. Therefore, doctor Rank, a friend of the house and more importantly a man, is free to enter Helmer's study at any time. In fact, except for the bedroom, Nora lacks what Sennett calls a person's "magic space" – "a zone of immunity" (1990), which is the study for Torvald.

The parlor, in spite of being a factually "feminine domain", was, by no means a secluded space, but what Fjelde figuratively calls "prison" (Ibsen 1978:122), to which I would add, "glass prison". Nora is perpetually exposed in the "comfortable", piano-equipped living room.

Hence, the functionalized and individualized organization of the bourgeois interior in *A Doll House*, involved also a gendered division. If this was true for the rooms of the apartment, it was even truer for the family members. Nora's gender defined her function within the family. As a result, just like Nora is banned from Helmer's study so is she discouraged from any productive work. The ideal of a new femininity was a loving wife and a provider of "an atmosphere of hominess" (Löfgren 1984), which doctor Rank, a bachelor, longs for in the draft for *A Doll House*: "That's one of the strange gifts that women often have – when you come into their sitting-rooms, you seem to sense the radiation of a gentle feeling of well-being" (Ibsen 1961:315).

The ideal woman of the bourgeoisie should figure like a counterbalance for her career-oriented husband (Löfgren 1984:49). Thus, Helmer, the *homo economicus* is contrasted to Nora, *femina domestica*, to use Cominos' terms (Cominos 1973). Just as the piano served as a token of the house's bourgeois respectability, an idle wife was a necessary feature of Helmer's respectability. The higher he climbed up the social ladder, the display of his growing wealth would be reflected in the more extravagant decoration of the home, and the growing idleness of his wife. For, one of the ways of communicating his business prosperity was by allowing Nora to waste more time and money, which is precisely what Nora hopes for. Simple idleness, however, was considered to be a negative thing. For Nora it looked more ladylike to do something uselessly pretty than to do nothing. "In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England, as well as in the rest of Europe, young feminine genteel idleness was mostly filled with a number of trivial occupations superficially related to the fine arts: they were known as *accomplishments*" (Loesser 1954:267). What were these female "accomplishments"?

According to Helmer, whom Toril Moi defines as "a card-carrying idealist aesthete if ever there was one" (2006:257), embroidering was definitely one of them (Ibsen 1978:181). Music, and more specifically piano music, was, however, considered to be the favourite. A letter from a correspondent of the *Allgemeine Musikalishce Zeitung* (*General Music News*) as early as from 1800 reveals this notion: "every well-bred girl, whether she has talent or not, must learn to play the piano or to sing: first of all it is fashionable; it is the most convenient way for her to [...] make an advantageous matrimonial alliance" (qtd. in Loesser 1954:137). Or, as the Ibsen's contemporary, the Norwegian writer Camilla Collett sarcastically comments on this prerogative skill which was part of the education of all the girls of higher stand, in her *Sidste Blade, Erindringer og Bekjendelser* from 1872:

Saa kommer pianospillet, den Skikk, at alle Døtre, enten de røbe Talent eller ei, enten Forældrene ynde Musik eller ei, skulle lære at spille. Et eneste pianospillende Barn er nok til at gjøre et Hus spagfærdigt og tvinge det til at falde tilfode. Vilde en Menneskeven alvorligt eftergranske Kilderne til den uhyre Nervøsitet, der hersker i vor By, vilde en vektig Anklagepost falde paa Pianoet (qtd. in Kjeldsberg 1985:36).

For Nora, being “accomplished”, or in Norwegian terms, “kondisjonert”, did not only mean that she was a “better prize in the marriage gamble”, more importantly, it was a confirmation of Helmer’s status. Nora should be able to play a couple of dance tunes, accompanied eventually by her singing, not more. Airs and waltzes were more praised than concertos (Loesser, 269). This was enough for a girl to be considered “accomplished”.

In the third act, Nora “strikes the first notes of the tarantella” (Ibsen 1978:173), by performing this act, any doubts about what echelon of society she might belong to are cleared. In this context one could also pose the question whether the piano in the salon might actually be Nora’s possession. As we know, it was Nora’s father who has financed the couple’s honeymoon trip to Italy, and not Helmer. Could these, then, imply that Nora originates from the upper echelons of the society than Helmer?

Be it as it may, Nora is in the moment of the dramatic action, a bourgeois wife, and was, as such, supposed to provide the atmosphere of homeliness in the Helmer salon using her “accomplishments”, one of which was her piano-playing. This feminine activity was, according to Weber points out, one of the main bourgeois home-comforts (Weber 1978:328), symptomatic for the new gendered structure of the bourgeois family.

The piano is, thus, not only a symbol of the living-room, feminine space par excellence. This instrument was, moreover, generally correlated with women. According to Arthur Loesser: “[t]he history of the pianoforte and the history of the social status of women can be interpreted in terms of one another” (1954:267). Indeed, for many reasons, piano-playing was considered specifically fashioned for women, a belief which was, among other, based on the mere technique of playing. When playing the piano, the woman keeps a perfect upright posture, without having to “purse her lips as when playing a flute, or twist her neck in an unfeminine way” when playing the violin, for instance (Loesser 1954:87). Hence, the piano was the perfect instrument for Nora, “the little lark”, to play, preserving and nourishing the fostered role of the innocent *femina domestica*.

Another reason for the alleged compatibility of women with the piano was, as Loesser concludes from the nineteenth-century historical documents, that “[i]t [was] indeed the easiest

of all instruments to play a little, the perfect tool for persons of small talent or ambition” (1954:258). The slogan “brilliant but not difficult” was commonly found on the back of the nineteenth-century piano sheets. Namely, the basics of piano-playing could be mastered by any girl without employing too much effort and still produce relatively flawless music. This would be impossible with any other, non-mechanical instrument.

Here, I will dwell on what seems a peculiarity in the text. In the second act of *A Doll House*, Nora is not the only one playing the piano. Helmer, as well as Doctor Rank, plays the tarantella. Indeed, piano playing was not only a feminine ability, even though it was primarily a feminine “accomplishment”, it was also part of what was considered proper male education. Boys from bourgeoisie were also taught some elementary piano playing, it being, as well as for girls, a badge of their status and refinement: “[t]he sons likewise must learn music: first, also, because it is the thing to do and is fashionable; secondly because it serves them too as a recommendation in good society...”, as a correspondent of Leipzig’s *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* (*General Music News*) writes (as quoted in Loesser 1954:137). Therefore, what seems to be a peculiarity of the text is in fact, another clear reference to Ibsen’s cultural climate.

The piano as epitome of Nora’s gendered identity

The established bourgeois proper manners involved that every family member in the Helmer family should act out his or her cliché idealist scripts, or theatricalized identities. Among the countless rules of bourgeois decorum, which proliferated in the nineteenth century, the principal one may be summarized in what Löfgren calls the bourgeois “credo”. It goes: *there is a time and place for everything* (Löfgren 1984:51).⁶

The ideal existence of a bourgeois woman was defined by men, or more specifically Nora’s father and husband. However, Nora is from the beginning until the very last moments of the play accepting this identity. Nora’s identity of a light-hearted performer of simple piano pieces and elegant embroiderer testifies, as Moi observes, of “Nora’s own unquestioned commitment to the traditional understanding of women’s place in the world” (Moi 2006:274). Indeed, as the critic finds, only in the last act of the play does “Nora [claim] her humanity

⁶ How important it was to respect these boundaries is revealed in the short scene where Nora is playing hide-and-seek in the living-room with the children. Krogstad comes in, startling Nora. In the scene, it is Nora’s behavior that is misplaced and not Krogstad’s. He has performed all the necessary rituals of proper etiquette before entering the parlor, whereas Nora performs an utmost intimate action in a place not meant for that.

[...] after explicitly rejecting two other identities: namely, “doll” and “wife and mother” (257). Otherwise, during the whole drama, Nora obeys the rules of her identity to the smallest detail.

According to Rønning, for a married bourgeois woman the most important thing was to be part of the family (2007:313). Nora was first and foremost somebody’s wife or mother:

HELMER. Oh! It’s outrageous! So you’ll run out like this on your most sacred vows.

NORA. What do you think are my most sacred vows?

HELMER. And I have to tell you that! Aren’t they your duties to your husband and children! (Ibsen 1978:192)

The maintenance and performance of these identities prove to be irreplaceable for the perpetuation of the Helmer tableau of the “sweet home”. However, as Rønning observes (2007), the dramatic text gives some subtle clues which point towards the fact that Nora has never actually performed her role of the mother. For, the upbringing of children was generally left to the maid.

How unusual the role of a mother is to Nora is perhaps most evident in the scene where her three children come home with the maid in the second act. Before they begin playing hide-and-seek, Nora takes off their clothes much to the surprise of the maid: “Oh, let me hold her a bit, Anne-Marie. My sweet little doll baby! [...] No, don’t bother, Anne-Marie- I’ll undress them myself. Oh yes, let me. It’s such fun.” (Ibsen 1978:143) This situation is unusual for both women. Nora insists on holding her daughter and on undressing her children – pointing out that this act is not a commonplace in their everyday life, but that Nora does, in fact, rarely perform those actions.

Finally, the last role, or identity, which is left for Nora in the marriage with Helmer is the one of a *wife*. In the nineteenth-century patriarchal sense this meant primarily that a woman should serve as an object of her husband’s sexual desire. According to Rønning, Nora “skulle fungere seksuelt stimulerende for en mannlig drift, som ellers ville kanaliseres ut av hjemmet” (2005:315).

However, Nora is aware that she can exercise most influence on Torvald precisely on this field. Therefore, she is assuming different masks, or is “theatralizing herself by acting out [her] own cliché idealist scripts” (Moi 2006:263), or as Nora from the earlier draft to the play victoriously exclaims to Mrs. Linde: “My husband shall see nothing. I have more faces than

one” (Ibsen 1961:324).⁷ These masks serve to preserve the tableau of the “happy family”, as well as please Helmer. Merely following the inculcated behavior pattern, Nora takes up the mask of “the little lark”, “the little squirrel” and behaves childishly knowing it to be the desired and accepted conduct which both flatters Torvald “with all his masculine pride” (136) and erotically entices him. Torvald clearly expresses this preferred form of feminine sexuality established in the bourgeoisie towards the end of the drama: “I wouldn’t be a man if this feminine helplessness didn’t make you twice as attractive to me” (189). Nora’s fostered performance of a helpless, childlike femininity stands in a tight relation to the piano playing as a specifically female activity.

3.3. THE PIANO AS A DRAMATIC TOOL

In a short, but intense scene in the second act of *A Doll House*, the “bourgeois domestic instrument” (Weber 1978:382) gets one of its most spectacular roles in Ibsen’s oeuvre. In the tarantella-scene, the piano elevates, as it is, from its “objectness” with its inherent socio-cultural symbolic, and becomes an *instrument*. Firstly, it becomes the dramatist’s instrument.

Very briefly, I will account of the plot of the play prior to the scene where the piano’s transformation takes place. The initial standstill of the sweet, complacent, bourgeois home of Nora and Torvald Helmer is threatened to be dissolved by Nils Krogstad, Helmer’s employee. Nora has borrowed money from him several years prior to the moment of the dramatic action, in order to pay for her and her husband’s trip to Italy, which was the only cure for the latter’s lethal illness. Unfortunately, Nora has, on this matter, acted without either her husband’s or her father’s consent. Moreover, she has forged her (dead) father’s signature on the contract. Faced with an imminent notice from his position at the bank, Krogstad threatens to reveal the whole matter to Helmer unless Nora gives in to his ultimatums.

Her hope for a carefree life in the bourgeois “sweet home” is shattered. Krogstad’s words directly preceding the tarantella-scene “finally [bring] her to the brink” (Durbach 1991:50). He will not settle for a simple repayment of the debt, nor will he for a higher sum draw back his attacks on the idyllic family. Not even is he deterred by Nora’s threats of suicide: “NORA. I have the courage now – for that. KROGSTAD. Oh, you don’t scare me. A smart, spoiled lady like you–” (Ibsen 1978:170).

⁷ See Helland (1994) and Haakonsen (1971) for a reading of the mask metaphor as the underlying metaphor of the drama.

Krogstad is at this point in the play even more ambitious. Instead of merely demanding his old post back, he threatens to put Torvald in a subordinate position, knowing that once the latter found out about Nora's forgery, all his demands would be fulfilled. He intends to compromise and defile Helmer's honor. Nora is utterly in his power: "KROGSTAD. Are you forgetting that I'll be in control then over your final reputation? (NORA *stands speechless, staring at him.*)" (ibid.).

The final hammer blow for Nora is (how appropriately) a light *sound* of Krogstad's "letter [falling] in the mailbox" (ibid.). It is the letter revealing Nora's crime and its consequences. Nora's desperation is now complete, as she seriously contemplates death: "Torvald, Torvald – now we're lost!" she cries out (ibid.). However, the suspense keeps rising. On a verge of a psychological breakdown, Nora confides in Mrs. Linde while Helmer and Doctor Rank keep knocking on the door of the salon urging to see her. Faced with death as apparently the only way out, Nora grabs to the straw of Mrs. Linde's promise of salvation as the latter "hurries out through the hall entrance" on a "top secret" mission to save her friend, last words of hope still echoing: "Stall him. Keep him in there. I'll be back as quick as I can" (172).

Provided she succeeds in keeping Torvald away from the mail-box, the "sweet home" and herself will be safe, and the catastrophe avoided. This moment in the play is decisive. In this moment the suspense reaches its peak – it is, as several Ibsen scholars have noted,⁸ the play's *turning point*: will Nora's crime be revealed or not?

NORA. What are you looking for?

HELMER. Just to see if there is any mail.

NORA. No, no, don't do that, Torvald!

HELMER. Now what?

NORA. Torvald, please. There isn't any.

HELMER. Let me look, though. (*Starts out. NORA, at the piano, strikes the first notes of the tarantella.*

HELMER, *at the door, stops.*) Aha!

NORA. I can't dance tomorrow if I don't practice with you.

HELMER (*going over to her*). Nora dear, are you really so frightened?

NORA. Yes, so terribly frightened. Let me practice right now; there is still time before dinner. Oh, sit down and play for me, Torvald. Direct me. Teach me, the way you always have.

HELMER. Gladly, if that's what you want. (*Sits at the piano.*)

NORA. (*snatches the tambourine up from the box, then a long, varicolored shawl, which she throws around herself, whereupon she springs forward and cries out:*) Play for me now! Now I'll dance!

(HELMER plays and NORA dances. RANK stands behind HELMER at the piano and looks on.) (173).

⁸ Høst (1946), Durbach (1991), Østerud (1993), Langås (2005), Moi (2006), for instance.

Ibsen first uses an auditory effect – the sound of the Krogstad’s letter falling into the mailbox – to mark the moment of Nora’s nervous break-down. Then another, much more powerful auditory image – the tarantella – marks the climax of the drama. The degree of Nora’s bewilderment is expressed by means of music. Other crucial points in the dramatic structure of the drama are also auditory images. The play opens with a sound: “[a] bell rings in the entryway; shortly after we hear a door being unlocked. Nora comes into the room, humming happily to herself” (Ibsen 1978:125) and ends with “the sound of a door slamming shut” (196). In *A Doll House*, I conclude, sounds pin-point the development of the plot. The sound of Nora entering the bourgeois parlor is the beginning – the presentation of the situation; piano music (the tarantella) is at the culmination of the conflict, and finally the play’s resolution is marked by a sound.

As a result, William Archer’s claim that the tarantella is “a last spasmodic effort in the (Gallic) art of keeping up the dramatic tension by means of external devices” (1904:35) is highly problematic. Rather, the tarantella is structurally and thematically an integral part of the play. Of course, it is not per chance that Ibsen chose that Nora dances to the tarantella. In the next chapter, I will focus on the symbolic inherent in this particular musical piece.

3.4 NORA’S TARANTELLA IN THE “SWEET HOME”: TRANSCENDENCE OR CAPITULATION?

The tarantella scene is often considered “the most spectacular” scene in the whole play (Törnqvist 1999:35), an emblem of the drama, even. It was used on posters announcing the theatre performances of the play, as early as in 1880. This particular scene served, namely, as an illustration for the Christiania theatre’s production of *A Doll House* in the Norwegian newspaper *Ny illustreret tidende* (“Et dukkehjem”). The power of this scene which is, according to Moi, “melodramatic in all the usual meanings of the word” (2006:268) inspired the English Victorian poet Arthur Symons (1865-1945) to write the poem *Nora on the Pavement* in 1895 (Goldfarb 1963:231).

One encounters Symons’ *Nora* in the moment when the Ibsen’s play ends. Upon slamming the outside door of the house his Nora completes the tarantella which is abruptly stopped by Helmer in the second act of the play, and “dances surcharged with the symbolist motif of the dance” (Shepherd-Barr 1997:ix). For Symons, Nora’s dance represents a mode of

transcending her patterned life in the marriage with Helmer. It is a moment of ecstasy, which Symons later explains as follows:

[The dance in the drawing-room] takes us suddenly out of all that convention, away from those guardians of our order who sit around the walls, approvingly, unconsciously; in its winding motion it raises an invisible wall about us, shutting us off from the whole world, in with ourselves; in its fatal rhythm, never either beginning or ending [...] gathering impetus which must be held back, which must rise into the blood (1907:388-389).

In *A Doll House* Nora dances in her drawing-room. However, is her tarantella dance a similarly liberating process from the “guardians of order who sit around the walls” within a bourgeois drawing-room as Symons suggests? Is it a liberating cognitive transmutation of life by an act of art as some Ibsen critics read this scene (most notably Rekdal 2000 and Langås 2005)?

Nora’s tarantella as Salome’s dance

On the level of the plot, tarantella is part of Nora’s preparations for the tomorrow’s masked ball, accounted for in the third act. The ball is to take place on the New Year’s Eve in the Stenborg’s apartment upstairs and Ibsen accounts of it already in the first act: “NORA. I’m so much looking forward to the Stenborgs’ costume party, day after tomorrow” (Ibsen 1978:151). Throughout the act two, Nora is busy preparing, Mrs. Linde helping her mend the costume of a Capri fisher-girl Torvald has picked out for her. The costume was purchased during the couple’s journey to Italy, and at the party Nora is to perform the tarantella dance she has learned on the trip. Her costume still not quite ready, Nora rehearses the tarantella dance in the drawing-room of her home.

HELMER. [...] (*Sits at the piano.*)

NORA (*snatches the tambourine up from the box, then a long, varicolored shawl, which she throws around herself, whereupon she springs forward and cries out:*) Play for me now! Now I’ll dance!

(*HELMER plays and NORA dances. RANK stands behind HELMER at the piano and looks on.*)

HELMER (*as he plays.*). Slower. Slow down.

NORA. Can’t change it.

HELMER. Not so violent Nora!

NORA. Has to be just like this.

[...]

RANK. Let me play for her.

HELMER (*getting up*). Yes, go on. I can teach her more easily then.

(*RANK sits at the piano and plays; NORA dances more and more wildly. HELMER has stationed himself by the stove and repeatedly gives her directions; she seems not to hear them; her hair loosens and falls over her shoulders; she does not notice, but goes on dancing. MRS. LINDE enters.*)

MRS. LINDE (*standing dumbfounded at the door*). Ah-!

NORA (*still dancing*). See what fun, Kristine!

HELMER. But Nora darling, you dance as if your life were at stake.

NORA. And it is.

HELMER. Rank, stop! This is pure madness. Stop it, I say!
(RANK *breaks off playing, and NORA halts abruptly.*) (173-174)

Moments before her tarantella Nora is, as we recall, torn between a serious plan to commit suicide, hope in the “miracle” and reliance in Mrs. Linde’s promise of salvation, which can only occur provided that Nora manages to stall Helmer and prevent him from reading Krogstad’s letter.

She is, thus, compelled to, in the midst of the neurotic whirlpool of emotions, behave normally, and continue the performance of Helmer’s innocent little doll-wife. Whenever Nora wants to influence Helmer: when asking him to give Mrs. Linde a job in the bank or when fighting for Krogstad’s cause, she makes superb performances of her inculcated twittering childlike feminine eroticism. This time, however, Torvald will not be deterred by Nora’s pledges and sweet cooing: in a situation where her “life is at stake” (174), she has to resort to a much more erotic mask. At the same time, she must carefully estimate how explicit the display of her female sexuality is allowed considering her gendered identity within marriage. Unlike Helmer’s freedom and right to feel and manifest erotic desire (verbalized very explicitly when the couple returns from the party in the third act of the play), Nora’s sexuality has to be camouflaged. The tableau of the “happy family” and “sweet home” implored that she does not transgress the behavior script. As a consequence, when Nora desperately tries to gain Helmer’s full attention, she can neither simply display her womanly attributes, nor go on with her everyday performance. How does Nora resolve this crisis?

Following his daily routine, Helmer irreversibly goes towards the mailbox, bound to discover Krogstad’s letter sealing Nora’s doom. The latter panics:

NORA. What are you looking for?
HELMER. Just to see if there is any mail.
NORA. No, no, don’t do that, Torvald!
HELMER. Now what?
NORA. Torvald, please. There isn’t any.
HELMER. Let me look, though. (*Starts out. NORA, at the piano, strikes the first notes of the tarantella.*
HELMER, at the door, stops.) Aha! (Ibsen 1978:173)

Nora resorts, at the moment of unbearable anguish, to music. As she resorts to the piano in order to divert Helmer, music is proposed to be Nora’s only possibility for salvation. The piano becomes the instrument for “spellbinding” Helmer. Why does piano music alone have such a captivating effect?

The key for answering this question lies, I believe, in the particular melody Nora plays. She plays “the first notes of the *tarantella*”.

Traditionally, according to the unspoken etiquette summarized in the bourgeois credo, “there is a time and place for everything” (Löfgren 1984:51), a well-bred, smiling hostess gracefully playing soft melodies on the house’s piano is the everyday ideal. Piano playing was, in fact, just like other activities in the space of the drawing-room, subordinated to the rules of “fine manners”. The performer, as well as the tunes played had to be appropriate for the occasion, crowning the tableau of the sweet home. However, *this* occasion is far from being everyday, hence the music Nora plays on the piano is not a soft nocturne. She plays the beginning of a passionate South-Italian melody. The tarantella presupposes an enraptured, highly erotic female dancer. This is exactly why Nora plays it.

“Ibsen’s image of a dancing doll is a complex, many layered visual metaphor with a history that looks back to women as the sexual play-things of early nineteenth-century romanticism and forward to the postromantic automata of male erotic fantasies” says Errol Durbach concerning Nora’s tarantella scene (1991:52). Indeed, she gains power over Helmer by inviting him to the “customary sexual titillation that Torvald has come to expect of Nora’s performance” (ibid.). The piano is in this instance, her accomplice in the act.

Finally, Helmer agrees not to check the mailbox after all, knowing that the “first notes of the tarantella” are to be immediately followed by Nora’s pseudo-pornographic dance, the peak of her (socially acceptable) feminine eroticism. For, as Moi has accurately observed, and as I have shown earlier in the analysis,⁹ one must always bear in mind that Nora shares Helmer’s idealistic and “unquestioned commitment to the traditional understanding of women’s place in the world” (Moi 2006:274). The question that irresistibly comes to mind is why Nora is, all these factors taken into account, allowed, encouraged moreover, to perform an erotic dance such as the Italian tarantella.

Precisely because it is out of the ordinary: because it is out of the bourgeois context. As Østerud points out, Nora’s role and costume “skal sees i sammenheng med den tids forestillinger om italiensk folkeliv, et yndet motiv blant nordiske kunstnere i Roma fra gullalderen og langt oppover på 1800-tallet” (1993:164). Further, according to Max Weber, being “Civilized” and “Rational” were presumably the features of the bourgeois North which were contrasted by the “Wild” and “Uncontrolled” image of the Southern people and cultures (Weber 1978:382). I will take Østerud’s idea one step further, interpreting the Italian South in *A Doll House* as, in fact, a reformulation of Orient.

⁹ Chapter 2.2, 26.

Ibsen is in this scene in the draft of *A Doll House* clearly referring to Orient. “NORA plays and sings ‘Anitra’s Song’ from Peer Gynt”, whereas Helmer and Rank are comfortably seated, smoking Turkish cigarettes, enjoying what Helmer calls: “[a] scene of family life” (Ibsen 1961:327). Agreeing with John Northam, the Ibsen’s draft material is such that it presents explicitly what is implicit in the final version of the play (1953:36). The direct references to Orient from the draft were finally replaced by a South-Italian dance, but the dialectics of the North-South dichotomy in the scene have remained.

Always remaining within the frames of appropriate behavior, Nora relies on this idealized image of the wild, passionate South as she masks into a Capri fisher girl. The image of the dancing Nora, wrapped in the varicolored shawl, passionately swinging in the rhythm of the tarantella exposed to a quasi-pornographic male gaze, brings to mind another image of an Oriental woman dancing for men. I am referring to the Biblical Salome and her dance of the seven veils.

The nineteenth-century fascination with South and oriental cultures brought this Old Testament character considerable popularity.¹⁰ It is the center piece of Oscar Wilde’s play *Salome* (1896), as well as Richard Strauss’ opera written in the first years of the 20th century (1904/05). Just like Salome’s dance, Nora’s tarantella has a double nature. In it, she is at once, object of masculine sexual desire and a “demonic” woman, a *femme fatale*, who uses the masculine gaze for gains of power. In the draft version of the play, Nora is explicitly referring to the dance as an item of exchange:

(NORA plays a few chords on the piano)
 HELMER (stops by the door). Aha!
 NORA. Recognize it?
 HELMER. Will you really?
 NORA. What do I get for it? (Ibsen 1961:326)

Further, both Nora’s and Salome’s dances intertwine life and death (Eros and Thanatos), seduction and liberation:

HELMER. But Nora darling, you dance as if your life were at stake.
 NORA. And it is. (Ibsen 1978:174)

In the tarantella Nora is not a “capricious little Capri girl” (181), fragile and innocent, the identity Helmer is expecting of her performance. Neither does she dance simply in order to prepare for the upcoming ball – this is merely an excuse, a camouflage. Nora’s dance is, in

¹⁰ One should but remember the growing amount of paintings presenting the idealized Oriental women, from the epoch. Jean Dominique Ingres’ *Turkish Bath* from 1862 might be the most typical example.

fact, her ultimate expression, her (automatic) response to the crisis, created both by external factors (Krogstad's threats, and real plans of suicide), and internal circumstances (her obligation to obey the rules of the "sweet home"). According to Moi, the tarantella is a typical melodramatic "reaction to the fear of the 'extreme states of voicelessness'" (2006:268). "Dancing the tarantella," the critic continues, "Nora's body expresses the state of her soul" (270). Nothing could be more authentic. As a result, the tarantella has often been interpreted through Nietzsche's concept of the Dionysian. It is, according to Haakonsen, "en erupsjon av kaotiske krefter som forlanger å bli brakt i orden" (Haakonsen 2003:141).¹¹ This leads to another important aspect of Nora's tarantella – its essentially ritualistic nature.

The piano as a ritualistic instrument

The latent eroticism of the tarantella dance and the fact that Nora assumes the identity of a Capri girl are, in my opinion, the possible reasons why Nora is allowed to perform such a dance without transgressing the etiquette within her bourgeois salon.

Gradually, Nora's dance becomes ever more wild and uncontrollable. Her hair "loosens and falls over her shoulders" (Ibsen 1978:173), she does not seem to hear Helmer's directions. At one point, the dance goes too far, and Helmer realizes that this is turning into something he has not been expecting: Nora is not anymore "a beautiful vision" (181) she was supposed to be. From a sexually exciting tableau, the dance has transformed into the real tarantist ritual right before his eyes, and as such needs to be stopped: "HELMER. Rank, stop! This is pure madness. Stop it, I say! (RANK *breaks off playing, and NORA halts abruptly.*)" (174).

In this scene, *A Doll House* opens up for what Østerud calls a "sacred drama" – "a drama of allegory, myth and ritual ceremony" (Østerud 1998:49-50). Nora's inner state preceding the tarantella is nearly a case-study of what the anthropologist Victor Turner calls "liminal occasions" (1986:24-27). Turner, drawing on the work of Arnold van Gennep defines "liminal occasions" as "times when continuity and change, past and future are held in an uneasy balance, on a threshold 'betwixt and between' the old and the new" (Turner cited in Emigh 1996:1) which in turn give rise to ceremonial performances.

¹¹ An "eruption of chaotic powers that demand to be brought back in order", my translation.

The “liminal occasion” to which I refer here, draws, according to Østerud, on the dialectics of carnival: “[j]eg ser på den som et uttrykk for den karneval og fastedialektikken som har holdt Nora og Helmers liv fast i de samme følelsesmessige bindinger gjennom åtte år, og gjort dem fremmed for hverandre og seg selv” (2006:43). The critic bases his conclusions on the carnival’s principal idea: there and then everyday rules do not apply, it is a moment when everything which is usually forbidden is made possible – all rules temporarily cease to exist. Indeed, after the dance, Nora orders champagne from the maid, and the banned sweets: “NORA. [...] champagne till daybreak! (*Calling out.*) And some macaroons, Helene. Heaps of them – just this once” (Ibsen 1978:174).

In the Ibsen criticism much work has been dedicated to finding the deeper analogies between the symbolic of Nora’s tarantella and the tarantist rituals (Haakonsen 1948, Collela 2007, Nordland 2006, et al.). According to Italian tradition, the dance is a corporal reaction of the victim of tarantula spider. The delirious body movements which make the tarantella dance were considered to be the only cure against the lethal venom. Rather than discussing whether it primarily relies on the traditions of carnival or tarantism, it suffices to establish that the tarantella from the second act of *A Doll House* is unquestionably a ceremonial, ritual dance, an attempt for transformation.

Indeed, initiated by “the first notes of the tarantella”, as the piano suddenly comes into the foreground, the text accounts for a series of transformations taking place. First and foremost, the hitherto mute scenic prop becomes *animated* and instantly elevates, as it is, from its “objectness”, and becomes an *instrument* used for ritual. The piano ceases to be merely an *object* that materializes Nora’s unbreakable bond to her class. It transforms, into Nora’s *tool* which she uses in her attempts to gain power over Helmer.¹² Further, the piano evolves from a “bourgeois” instrument, best suited for a well-bred lady playing soft nocturnes into a ritualistic instrument. This transformation further entails that the reader now interprets Nora’s dance as a ritual, a peculiar exorcistic *rite of passage*. Hereby, the entire bourgeois parlor of the Helmer family also becomes a ritualistic “cosmic space” (Østerud 1998:52). Nora, the “sweet wife”, Helmer’s “little lark” transforms into an erotic seductive Salome, but does she also transform into a knowing, autonomous person – is this the “moment of [her] moral education and spiritual self-discovery” (Durbach 1991:53)?

¹² It becomes, as well, Ibsen’s dramatic tool, cf. chapter 2.3.

Drawing on Gilbert Rouget's *Music and Trance* from 1985, Emigh finds that "in many performances that depend on trance inducement, the music [...] enables trance behavior to 'attain its full development'" (1996:19). Now, Ibsen's Nora dances not to drums, flutes, guitars, and castanets which are traditionally used to accompany the dancer performing a tarantella (Colella 2007:44). Nora dances, however, to the sound of piano. How does this affect the ritual "cogito performance" Nora seeks to undergo (Moi 2006:268)?

The erotic dance needed to be made appropriate so as to suit a married bourgeois lady – Nora, who, therefore, dances to the music of the piano supplemented with her swinging of the tambourine. The piano, symbol of the bourgeois home comforts shows to be, however, not a suitable instrument for the *rite of passage* Nora desperately needs to undergo. Nor were the artistic capabilities of Helmer or Doctor Rank. I believe that once the drums were replaced by the piano, the wild Southern dance became "civilized", "tamed" – appropriated for the bourgeois salon's good-manners. As a result, the piano could hardly answer Nora's need and provide a violent, wild background for her transformation. As Rouget concludes when analyzing the role of music in trance: "trances most often occur when emotions are at their strongest and the music is at its most dramatic" (1985:84-85). However, the rite of passage, or ecstasy (Nietzsche), or catharsis (Aristotle) is never performed. Helmer stops the ritual as the tarantella's crescendo is about to reach its peak.

Modesty, simplicity, conventionality were part of the bourgeois ideology governing Nora's existence in her "sweet home" – doll house, and are further incarnated in the piano, and piano music. "[The pianos] were to be played mostly by amateurs and to be comfortably ensconced with the rest of the furnishings of the early-nineteenth-century home. In a way, more centrally important for these instruments was that they were social artifacts" finds Edwin M. Good in his technological history of the piano (2001:121), as such, they were best suited for waltzes and other easy pieces. Just therefore, I would argue, the piano could not follow Nora through her transformation. It might even be seen as an inhibition to Nora's transgression of the restraints in Helmer's (that is, bourgeois) choreography. The piano, the hoped-for means for achieving transcendence, cannot be detached from its cultural context. Just therefore, Nora fails to transcend her identity within the same cultural context. The piano cannot correct

Nora's social ills, being itself, metaphorically, the origin of these ills. It is the epitome of her gender restraints.

I find, therefore, somewhat problematic Langås' conclusion that: "In her dancing, Nora liberates herself from Helmer's inflexible choreography, [...] signifying a break with the rigidly directed way of living that has been hers" (2005:164), and Rekdal's stand that during the dance Nora undergoes "full transformation" (2000:44). In fact, I believe that even during the tarantella, Helmer (or the patriarchal bourgeois norms he incarnates) is still in control of his doll wife. This is established by means of the rigid suffocating instruments of control which are intrinsic in the etiquette of the living-room and its objects, most importantly the piano. For, eventually, it is he who makes the music and with it the ritual, stop. Therefore, rather than seeing the tarantella as Nora's moment of revelation, when she abruptly gains insight into her doll-like existence, I would rather agree with Durbach who finds that the tarantella is her final "willing capitulation to the social and sexual roles imposed on her" (1991:53).

4. I'M JUST LOOKING AT MY OLD PIANO. IT DOESN'T SEEM TO FIT IN WITH ALL THESE OTHER THINGS: HEDDA GABLER

4.1. THE PIANO AS A DRAMATIC TOOL

In *Hedda Gabler*, as in *A Doll House*, Ibsen uses the piano not merely as part of the set decoration. Again, the protagonist handles it, and again, the piano music plays an important part in furthering the action. Throughout the drama, Ibsen is constantly reminding the reader of the piano's presence or absence.

The motif is first mentioned already in the stage descriptions for the first act. The piano is part of the Tesman household, as is placed on the "left, slightly out from the wall" of the salon (Ibsen 1978:695). The first characters that appear in the living-room point to the lack of empty spaces in the room. As a consequence, Berta, the maid, poses a flower bouquet on the piano, with the excuse that "there isn't a bit of space left" (696). Later in the same act, Hedda, drawn by this misplaced flower-bouquet, points out to Tesman that she would preferred *her* piano moved away into the back room (706). Indeed, in the second act, Ibsen stresses that the piano has been moved out. From that point on, Hedda restlessly goes back and forth the two rooms, occasionally playing some chords on the piano. Finally, in the last scene of the play, Hedda closes the curtains behind her in the back room, plays a wild dance melody on the piano, then pulls the trigger of the pistol against her temple.

Evidently, Ibsen elaborates this motif throughout the drama, all the while stressing Hedda's particular bond to this object. The piano and the pistols are uniquely linked to the protagonist (as the slippers are to Tesman, and curly hair to Mrs. Elvsted, for instance). Therefore, I believe these are Hedda's *attributes*, or maybe even her character's leitmotifs.¹³ Hedda uses those in such a manner that it always shocks the other characters:

([HEDDA] is heard playing a wild dance melody on the piano)
MRS. ELVSTED (*starting up from her chair*). Oh – what is that?
TESMAN (*running to the center doorway*). But Hedda dearest – don't go playing dance music tonight! Think of Auntie Rina! And Eilert, too!
[---]
(A shot is heard within. TESMAN, MRS. ELVSTED and BRACK start from their chairs.)

¹³ The leitmotif technique was elaborately used by Ibsen's contemporary Richard Wagner in his "music dramas", most notably in the 1876 *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (Wagner 1970), and was theoretically explained in his "Opera and Drama" and "The Art-Work of the Future", from 1849 and 1851, respectively. This technique involved that each particular character, locale or elements in the plot were accompanied by always the same musical theme. Ibsen might have been, in this respect, influenced by Wagner, since particularly in this play, characters seem to be distinguished by a particular object, dress, gesture or catchphrase.

TESMAN. Oh, now she's fooling with those pistols again. (Ibsen 1978:777)

Other than being Hedda's attribute, the piano has another function in the structure of the drama. The moment when Hedda plays it is at once the dramatic turning point. This is a technique which Ibsen has already used in *A Doll House*. Hedda interacts with the piano when she is left with no other way out from her unbearable situation: her hope in "something that shimmers with spontaneous beauty" is crushed by reality – her project of "inspiring" Eilert Løvborg into committing a "beautiful" suicide has turned out to be a fiasco. Her "specialist" husband Tesman and the "little" Thea Elvsted make it clear to her that "there is nothing the two of them need from her now". She is in the mercy of Judge Brack who threatens to expose her involvement in Løvborg's death unless she complies with his (implicitly sexual) demands. Being confronted with such a constellation of circumstances, Hedda "*goes into the inner room, pulling the curtains closed after her*" after which she "*is heard playing a wild dance melody on the piano*" (ibid.).

Piano music, or more specifically, "wild dance melody", marks the play's climax, and is itself a metaphor for Hedda's catastrophe. It does not only function as an expression of her inner turmoil, desperation and chaos. It marks the threshold in the plot: will Hedda succumb and accept her new circumstances? It also functions as an overture to one of the most striking examples of what Moi calls the anti-spectacular or anti-theatrical deaths in Ibsen's oeuvre (2001). However, even though the very act of suicide, and piano playing, happens out of site for the other characters and the theatre audience alike, the "wild dance melody" is unquestionably a formally very theatrical dramatic tool Ibsen uses to raise the tension and emphasize the rapture of his protagonist's inner being.

4.2. THE INTERIOR AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

Hedda Gabler is yet another Ibsen's drama which entirely unfolds in one same space. Fjelde observes that "only *Hedda Gabler* is as hermetically cut off from the outdoors and the natural world [as *A Doll House*]" (Ibsen 1978:122). In fact, the atmosphere of prison might even be more emphatic in this drama. Whereas Nora ultimately leaves the drawing room of her apartment, leaving her husband who, symbolically, stays within "the doll house", there seems to be no escape for Hedda. She seems perpetually confined to the bourgeois prison which was

formerly Secretary Falk's villa.¹⁴ Apart from her particular sortie, she only leaves the stage in the moment when she sees Mrs. Elvsted out. The Danish critic, Elin Andersen sees, therefore, a clear parallel between the Tesman's salon and Sartre's hell. The doors in the Tesman's house lead to more closed spaces, empty children's rooms, lonely bedrooms: "[s]om i Sartres helvede fører udgangene herfra blot til endnu flere lukkede rum, tomme børnekamre, ensomme soveværelser. I det smagfulde kvalme rum lukker Ibsen Hedda inde" (Andersen 1997:52). Her "tastefully furnished" prison is:

A large, attractively furnished drawing room, decorated in dark colors. In the rear wall, a wide doorway with curtains drawn back. The doorway opens into a smaller room in the same style as the drawing room. [...] In the foreground is an oval table with table cloth and chairs around it. By the right wall, a wide, dark porcelain stove, a high-backed armchair, a cushioned footstool, and two taborets. In the right-hand corner, a settee with a small roundtable in front. Nearer, on the left and slightly out from the wall, a piano. On either side of the doorway in back, étagères with terra-cotta and majolica ornaments. Against the back wall of the inner room, a sofa, a table, and a couple of chairs can be seen. Above this sofa hangs a portrait of a handsome, elderly man in a general's uniform. Over the table, a hanging lamp with an opalescent glass shade. A number of bouquets of flowers are placed about the drawing-room in vases and glasses. Others lie on the tables. The floors in both rooms are covered with thick carpets. Morning light. The sun shines in through the glass door (Ibsen 1978:695)

If we compare the salons of Helmer and Tesman, it is clear that they bear many similarities. This interior is, however, noticeably more elegant and expensive, with its predominantly dark, distinguished colors and pale lights. The Tesman family lives in a villa "in the fashionable part of town" (693), surrounded by a garden. It is so huge that Tesman does not know what to do with all the rooms. He says to Aunt Julie that the villa is: "[f]irst-rate! Absolutely first-rate! Only I don't know what we'll do with the two empty rooms between the back parlor and Hedda's bedroom" (700).

This grandiose house was actually the reason why Hedda accepted to marry Tesman, which otherwise seems as an utterly "remarkable" matrimonial alliance to almost every side character in the play (725). One evening, when the two were returning from a party, they passed a beautiful villa where Hedda said she would like to live in. Even though she meant it, she merely said it to keep the conversation going. Tesman later proposed to her. Relying on his prospect university career he promised her that she would live in this very villa and would have a butler and a riding horse. This was, in Hedda's words "certainly more than [her] other admirers were willing to do for [her]" (ibid.). Being almost twenty-nine, Hedda "really had danced [herself] out. [Her] her time was up" (ibid.). Despite Tesman's apparent flaws, Hedda tries not to "find anything especially ridiculous about him", hoping that he "could still make a

¹⁴ "Statsrådinne Falks villa" (Ibsen 2006:757), i.e. the villa of the late Cabinet Minister's wife, from the original was translated as "Secretary Falk's villa" by Fjelde (Ibsen 1978:700). However, this rather inadequate translation is still better than the one offered by McFarlane – "old Lady Falk's villa" (Ibsen 1966:177).

name for himself” (ibid.). The luxuriousness and respectability of the house Tesman had promised her was decisive for Hedda. The villa formerly belonged to a high civil servant, a member of the parliament. The play begins the morning after the Tesmans arrived from their honey-moon into the house “where [they] had always wanted to live” (728). The villa in the “fashionable part of town” (639), so to the taste of Hedda Gabler, is to become their home. However, the house turns out not to be quite as Hedda had expected.

First thing she does upon arrival is order the maid, Berta, to take off all the covers from the furniture. From that point on, she seems more and more irritated towards her new residence. The first morning in the new “home”, Hedda instantly complains about the smell of the many flowers. Then she complains about the open window and the curtains. She asks them to be drawn back, since they are “letting in a whole flood of sunshine”. The window, however, should remain open. Later on, Hedda discusses with Tesman about moving the piano from one room into the other. Rarely has an Ibsen’s character been so dissatisfied and frustrated by his/her entourage. Why is Hedda so insistent on re-arranging the interior?

In order to trace the reasons why this space is so viscerally repulsive to Hedda, I will draw on the theories from Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological work on taste as a cultural distinctive trait, *Distinction* from 1984 as well as Jean Baudrillard’s sociological interpretation of everyday objects expressed in the book and article of the same name: *The System of Objects* (1996 and 1988, respectively).

Hedda is the daughter of the late general Gabler – a senior civil servant. Tesman’s father, however, was a priest, a lower civil servant (Rønning 2007:346). The Tesmans were accustomed to admire her from afar, as she would gallop by on her horse, and wearing a “long black riding outfit, with a feather in her hat”, as George Tesman’s aunt, Miss Juliana remembers her back “in the general’s day” (696). The lifestyles and background cultures of the Tesman couple are considerably different, yet the petty-bourgeois Tesman was still the best choice of the upper-class Hedda. Why was it so? This play, as many critics have concluded (Rønning 1973 and 2007, Østerud 2001, Aarseth 1991), reflects the rapidly changing Norwegian society of the nineteenth century. Indeed, historical data show that starting from the political turbulences of 1884, the traditional elite of senior civil servants was gradually replaced by the educational bourgeoisie as the new socio-cultural elite (Myhre 2004:117). Taking this into account it is easy to imagine that it was not only Hedda’s age which hastened the process of her choosing a husband. By marrying Tesman, and living in the

house with such a reputation, Hedda was hoping she would still retain some elements of her former lifestyle and culture.

However, the text emphasizes how essentially incompatible Hedda's and Tesman's cultures are. A very good example to this is their attitude towards economic matters. Hedda shows very little concern about money, whereas Tesman "always goes around worrying about how people are going to make a living" (Ibsen 1978:718). This clearly reveals Hedda's adherence to what Bourdieu calls the "cultural elite". The principal distinction, the essence of the wealthiest stratum's culture, rests in superior economic power, which "is first and foremost a power to keep economic necessity at arm's length" (Bourdieu 1984:55). By virtue of her breeding, Hedda still sees herself superior to Tesman. Economizing and living sparingly is not customary for the wealthiest stratum's culture. This is why Hedda orders the maid to take off all the covers from the furniture as soon as she comes into the house. According to Bourdieu: "a group's whole lifestyle can be read-off from the style it adopts in furnishing or clothing" (1984:77). Covers that are used to protect the furniture from being worn out, are a clear sign of the petty bourgeois culture. Hedda will not tolerate such elements of inferior culture in her salon. However, is this really *her* salon? She is to live in it, but did not furnish it. It was all arranged for by somebody with not such a distinguished background – Tesman's old Aunt Julie.

Miss Julie Tesman has, during the couple's honey-moon trip in the South, organized the space of Hedda's own living room, choosing the colors, pieces of furniture, and so forth. Conversely, this space seems perfectly fitting for her nephew George. According to Helge Rønning (2007), the Tesman salon might be an illustration of Walter Benjamin's idea from his aphorism "Hochherrschaftlich möblierte Zehnzimmerwohnung" (1986) about the true inhabitant of the bourgeois salon being a collector. Indeed, Tesman's greatest passion is collecting old artifacts and writing on the handicrafts in the medieval Brabant. Another Tesman's passion are his slippers, painstakingly embroidered by his dying aunt – a sign of his domestication: "[i]n Hedda Gabler, domestic Tesman patters about in his slippers, while the horsewoman Hedda shoots pistols", finds Joan Templeton in her book *Ibsen's Women* (1997:330). The socio-cultural differences between the two could not be bigger.

The overload of chairs, taborets, armchairs, settees, sofas, tables, comfortable footstools, cushions, thick carpets and table cloths, lamps, ornaments, and finally a piano

expresses the contemporary bourgeois ideal of a cozy home.¹⁵ However, in this salon Hedda “moves about, [...] raising her arms and clenching her fists as in frenzy” (Ibsen 1978:705), since in all of the named objects Hedda sees the stamp of the ignoble Aunt Julie, whose taste Hedda, in an awkward scene, compares to that of a maid. According to Bourdieu, “[a]esthetic intolerance can be terribly violent. Aversion to different life-styles is perhaps one of the strongest barriers between the classes” (1984:56):

BRACK. What were you saying about the hat?

HEDDA. Oh, it’s something that happened with Miss Teman this morning. She’d put her hat down over there on the chair. (*Looks at him and smiles.*) And I pretended I thought it was the maid’s. (728)

Later on in the same dialogue, Hedda summarizes her frustration towards the entire interior decoration: “HEDDA. Ugh – all the rooms seem to smell of lavender and dried roses. But maybe that scent was brought in by Aunt Julie” (729). This is the essence of Hedda’s is frustration with the interior of her house: all the walls, windows and objects which are to surround her “for the rest of her married life” lack the features of an upper-class, “legitimate” culture, bearing, on the contrary, the aesthetic stamp of a social class lower than hers. The villa has an unresolvable stamp of the petty bourgeois “middle-brow” taste and culture. Therefore, Hedda tries to actively interfere with the arrangement of her new “home”. In this context, one scene is particularly important.

The Piano as Hedda’s Property

According to Baudrillard, objects institute “a more or less consistent system of meanings” (1996:9). This “spoken system of objects” “does not structure the personality; it designates and classifies it. It does not structure social relations: it demarcates them in a hierarchical repertoire.” (19). Towards the end of the first act, after Hedda and George Tesman have seen Tesman’s Aunt Julie out, Hedda brusquely changes the topic of the conversation saying:

HEDDA: I’m just looking at my old piano. It doesn’t really fit in with all these other things.

TESMAN. With the first salary I draw, we can see about trading it in on a new one.

HEDDA. No, not traded in. I don’t want to part with it. We can put it there, in the inner room, and get another here in its place. When there’s a chance, I mean.

TESMAN (*slightly cast down*). Yes, we could do that, of course. (706)

Her attention was initially drawn by a bouquet placed on the piano: “HEDDA. (*picks up the bouquet from the piano*). These flowers weren’t here when we got in last night” (ibid.). The reader will then remember a small detail from the scene instructions: there is a piano by the

¹⁵ Cf. chapter 3.1.

left wall of the living-room. Ibsen takes up this motif again, when the maid Berta, perplexed with heaps of flower bouquets in the room, simply can not find space for yet another one: “BERTA (*by the table, perplexed, with the bouquet in her hand*). I swear there isn’t a bit of space left. I think I’ll have to put it here, miss. (*Places the bouquet on the piano.*)” (696).

The piano belongs exclusively to Hedda. It is one of the very few objects – her personal possessions which she brings into the new house. It is, apart from the portrait of her father and a writing desk, the only piece of furniture which is hers. If we pursue Baudrillard’s idea that objects “speak each their own idiom” about their owners’ socio-cultural position, upbringing, interests and so forth (1988:15), the piano in the Tesman living-room has clearly a different “discourse” compared to all the other objects in the salon. According to Baudrillard, “psychological and sociological realities” of everyday objects are “over and above objects’ perceptible materiality” (1996:8). As a result, just as all the other objects “smell of lavender and dried roses”, they bear a “scent” of Aunt Julie’s culture, so the piano bears the mark of Hedda’s upper-class culture.

The simple maid Berta, as well as the petty bourgeois George and his aunt do not notice this clash of socio-cultural discourses in the furnishing of the living-room, taking the piano for yet another stand for a flower-bouquet. For Hedda, however, the piano has a much bigger significance.

Let us, yet again, focus on the scene when Hedda and George Tesman are talking about the piano in the living-room. Hedda says: “I’m just looking at my old piano. It doesn’t really fit in with all these other things” (Ibsen 1978:706). This opens for a comical misunderstanding which is almost a commonplace for the conversations between the spouses. This time, I believe, the misunderstanding stems from the intricate “discourse” of the piano.

According to Baudrillard (1996, 1988) each everyday object may carry up to four different values, meanings or discourses. First there is the object’s *functional*, instrumental, value. Second, the object has an *exchange*, or economic value. These are its basic meanings, which Baudrillard calls denotative. The latter two values involve a subjective relation to the object, and could be, therefore, called connotative. The third one is the object’s *symbolic* value: the meaning it has to one particular person, but not necessarily another. The fourth value is the object’s value as a *sign*. The latter two values of a specific object are socially established within a community.

In the dialogue between Tesman and Hedda, the comical misunderstanding stems from Tesman referring to the piano's denotative meanings, whereas Hedda really refers to the piano's connotations. Tesman understands that Hedda wishes to move the piano out of the living room simply because it is "old". Tesman, in his rather banal and unimaginative manner concludes that Hedda is complaining about the piano's shabbiness which ruins the overall fashionable impression of the salon. Therefore, believing that he has understood Hedda right, he refers to the piano as an object of exchange: "With the first salary I draw, we can see about trading it in on a new one" (ibid.).

Hedda quickly explains that she does not want to part with it, but that she simply wants it removed from that particular space: "No, not traded in. I don't want to part with it. We can put it there, in the inner room, and get another here in its place" (ibid.). The word which carries the meaning in Hedda's utterance is not the word "old", but the word "my". What Hedda means is that "*her* old piano" (my italics) does not belong with the rest of the bric-a-brac Aunt Julie has furnished the drawing room with. For her the piano has an emotional, or symbolic, meaning.

These are the reasons why Hedda wants the piano removed: first since it does not belong to the "discourse" of the other objects in the salon. It is a *sign* of an upper-class culture which is not Tesman's. Second, because the piano is one of the few objects which actually belongs to her. It is a *symbol* of Hedda's "pre-Tesman time". Hedda can, thus, simply not tolerate that her piano is turned into a stand for a flower-bouquet by the ignoble Tesmans.

Before I continue exploring what other meanings the piano has as specifically Hedda's property, only as a side remark I wish to point out that the piano's general socio-cultural significance is also acknowledged by the narrow-minded Tesman: its value of a sign of family's status, wealth and ideology. Both Tesman and Hedda agree that if the piano is to be removed, it needs to be "traded in for a new one" as soon as "there's a chance", referring to the unspoken rule that every respectable home is obliged to have a piano in the drawing room.

However, in the discussed scene between Hedda and George Tesman, the *symbolic* value of the piano as Hedda's property is more important than its socio-cultural significance (unlike for example the piano in *A Doll House* where the piano lacks the symbolic value). It is precisely the *personal* attachment of Hedda to her piano with its derived symbolic meanings, which are crucial for the understanding of this motif in the play. This is the reason why Hedda

has a special relation to the piano: it is unique in terms of all the other elements in the salon which are more or less Tesman's attributes.

The piano as Hedda's distinctive object

Hedda's possessions, the piano, the pistols, and the portrait of her father are objects that she brings into her new dwelling. Throughout the text, Hedda is constantly inter-acting with her possessions. These objects, as explained in the previous chapter, do not only objectify her social and cultural identity, pointing towards her upper-class decent, they also have an emotional value for her. They are relics of her Gabler life.

The old piano is her "cultural inheritance", which in a special way stands for the values, virtues and competences inculcated into Hedda as "General Gabler's daughter" (696). However, it is also a means by which Hedda tries "to stop time". According to Bourdieu,

In contrast to upwardly mobile individuals or groups, 'commoners' of birth or culture who have their future, i.e., their being, before them, individuals or groups in decline endlessly reinvent the discourse of all aristocracies, essentialist faith in the eternity of nature's celebration of tradition and the past, the cult of history and its rituals, because the best they can expect from the future is the return of the old order, from which they expect the restoration of their social being (Bourdieu 1984:111).

The piano is part of Hedda's struggle to "endlessly reinvent the discourse of her aristocracy", as Bourdieu formulated it, and stop the passing of time. Hedda does not relate to time progressively. She seems not to be investing into long-term plans, as for example Tesman does. On the contrary, the inevitability of the passing of time dreads her:

HEDDA (*again calm and controlled*). I'm just looking at the leaves – they are so yellow – and so withered.
TESMAN [...]. Yes, well, we're into September now.
HEDDA (*once more restless*). Yes, to think – that already we're in – in September. (Ibsen 1978:705)

There are two conflicting dynamic processes in *Hedda Gabler*. One is expressed in the efforts of the Tesman family aiming towards the embourgeoisement of Hedda, and the other is revealed in the latter's opposing actions by which she seeks to return and maintain her previous identity. Very simply, one could say that this is expressed in her renouncing of the identity of Mrs. Hedda *Tesman* struggling towards the maintenance of that of Hedda *Gabler*. The title of the drama clearly shows that Ibsen had this idea in mind. The drama is not about Hedda *Tesman*, but Hedda *Gabler*. Hedda's struggle is, according to Rønning, grounded in her being a representative of what Georg Lukács termed Ibsen's "abstract idealists". Hedda is, like many other Ibsen's protagonists "unable to come to terms with the society that surrounds

[her. She is] divided and marked by a feeling of being superfluous, both in relation to society as whole and in [her] most intimate attachments” (2001:424).

Her previous Gabler identity included that she was the most desirable lady at balls, known across the town for her pompous, extravagant horseback rides. She used to make other girls, as well as men, fear her. Her favourite pass-times were dances, shooting pistols and probably skillful piano-playing. When the drama opens, however, Hedda’s status has changed. She is no longer Hedda Gabler, but Mrs. Tesman, a (petty) bourgeois *wife*. Hedda seems not only disinterested in performing this new role, she shows clear defiance from adjusting to this new civil and social status. She is, for instance, calling her husband by his last name, and referring to her married life as an endless, boring train-ride (Ibsen 1978:726). Other characters in the play also find her new identity utterly absurd:

LØVBORG (*resentment in his voice*). Hedda Gabler married? And to George Tesman?

HEDDA. Yes – that’s how it goes.

LØVBORG. Oh, Hedda, Hedda – how could you throw yourself like that! (736)

Hedda’s already almost unbearable “status quo” of Mrs. Tesman is unstoppably turning for the worse. Judge Brack maliciously concludes that Hedda will not be bored for too long in the new house, since “now, it’s on the way” (730). She will soon have to confront with what “in a rather elegant language – is called [her] most solemn responsibility” (ibid.). Hedda is soon going to turn into the bourgeois *mother*. Even though Hedda desperately tries to negate this both to herself and others, time is working against her. To Tesman’s comment on how “plump and buxom she’s grown” during the honey-moon trip, Hedda brusquely retorts that she is “exactly as when [she] left” (704).

This identity, however, is very much hoped for by Aunt Juliana Tesman. Through subtle gestures,¹⁶ Aunt Juliana is aiming at transforming the “General Gabler’s daughter” into the “bourgeois housewife whose main task [is] to embroider, play the piano, decorate the house” (Frykman 1979:111) and most importantly give birth to George’s children. Consequently, Theodor W. Adorno concludes that in the already mentioned episode in the play where Hedda maliciously takes Aunt Julie’s hat to be the maid’s, it is actually Hedda who is the wronged part, although at first glance, the opposite seems true (1993:95-96). Rekdal has poignantly observed that Hedda is subjected to a “taming” process: the aunt “constantly [trying] to control and define Hedda through the family norms of the Tesman family: care and kindness” (my translation Rekdal 2000:239). Hedda’s integrity is constantly

¹⁶ Such as an overly familial behavior towards Hedda, the almost maternal kissing her hair etc.

under attack by the Aunt who, among other things, arranges Hedda's living space instead of her, and thus imposes as an authority in Hedda's own house (Rekdal 2000:241). The new *Tesman* identity which she has "stumbled into" is forced on her by all sides in the new "salon". Indeed, even the objects within it are latently menacing.

According to Baudrillard, objects systematically designate and classify the owner's personality (1996:19). Hence, by means of objects Aunt Julie has surrounded Hedda with, she has managed to infiltrate her into the discourse of the petty-bourgeois. In defence, Hedda is using all the means to distinguish herself from the *Tesman* group¹⁷ and affirm her superior culture:

[The] affirmation of power over a dominated necessity always implies a claim to a legitimate superiority over those who, because they cannot assert the same contempt for contingencies in gratuitous luxury and conspicuous consumption, remain dominated by ordinary interests and urgencies (Bourdieu 1984:56).

Rhetoric and manner are such means of distinction. Unlike *Tesman's* rather comical repetitive "just think, Hedda", echoed by the Aunt Juliana's "just imagine" (Ibsen 1978:697), Hedda's speech has many subtleties which point to her fine education. Postures, abstention from emotional outbursts and her manners in general are other modes by which Hedda tries to establish her socio-cultural independence of the *Tesmans*. "The emphasis on manners, and through them on mode of acquisition, enables seniority within a class to be made as the basis of the hierarchy within the class" (Bourdieu 1984:95). However, "using symbolic goods, especially those regarded as the attributes of excellence, constitutes one of the key markers of 'class' and also the ideal weapon in strategies of distinction" (66). The piano is, I believe, one of Hedda's tools, means in her fight against this embourgeoisement.

In order to resist to the process of domestic subordination which is taking place, Hedda emphatically marks her *Gabler* identity by, what Jürgen Habermas calls, "staging of nobility" (1989:8). This consists, apart from manners, in Hedda's use of her material possessions, powerful symbolic markers.

As Durbach concludes in "The Apotheosis of Hedda Gabler":

[Hedda] remains, throughout the play, Hedda Gabler – the father's daughter – impressing that image of herself upon a world incapable of either sustaining or understanding the values by which she lives.

¹⁷ In a comment to *Hedda Gabler*, Ibsen wrote that "*Tesman*, his old aunts and [...] Berta form a picture of complete unity. They think alike, they share the same memories and have the same outlook on life. To Hedda they appear like a strange and hostile power, aimed at her very being" (Ibsen 1978:691, see also Northam 1953:149).

What is equally important, however, is Hedda's own reluctance to sustain her Gablerism by making it exemplary in a world of trivial, middle-class vulgarity (1971:154)

The pistols, the portrait and the piano belong, according to Templeton, "to the pre-Tesman time when Hedda was free" (1997:216). These objects present also, according to Bourdieu, the way she perpetuates her waning upper-class culture:

Every material inheritance is, strictly speaking, also a cultural inheritance. Family heirlooms not only bear material witness to the age and continuity of the lineage and so consecrate its social identity, which is inseparable from permanence over time: they also contribute in a practical way to its spiritual reproduction, that is, to transmitting the values, virtues and competences which are the basis of legitimate membership in a dynasty (1984:76).

Hedda's piano can undoubtedly be seen as such an object. Indeed, in the scene where Hedda urges that it is removed, the piano develops from an object among the multitude of bric-a-bracs in the Tesman salon into Hedda's personal property. The piano, as well as in the pistols and the portrait of her late father, testify of Hedda's determination to eternalize her Gablerism by making it exemplary in a world of trivial, middle-class vulgarity – the "tight little world [she has] stumbled into", which "makes life so miserable! So utterly ludicrous!" (Ibsen 1978:730).

4.3. THE INNER ROOM – THE INNER SELF

The piano is, thus, moved out from the living-room into the inner room. The two spaces are separated by heavy curtains, which are, for the most part of the play, drawn-back. This makes the furnishing of the back room visible from the salon. The most conspicuous element therein is the portrait of General Gabler majestically hanging above the sofa. The act two opens as follows: "[t]he rooms at the TESMANS', same as in the first act, except that the piano has been moved out, and an elegant little writing table stands by the sofa to the left" (Ibsen 1978:722).

Interestingly, not many critics have dedicated special attention to the "apparently insignificant point of visual detail" – the replacing of the piano by the writing desk. Sigmund Skard (1960) mentions it in relation to Else Høst's monograph on *Hedda Gabler* (1958), but only to dispute its importance as a metaphoric element. Rekdal acknowledges the importance of this change of scenography, believing that the writing table which comes in the piano's place should be interpreted as a sign of Hedda's potential subliming activity or "purpose in life" (1998:251). Both Høst and Rekdal, however, focus on the fact the writing table being moved *in*, and not on the piano being moved *out*. Conversely, I would approach this change

from the perspective of the object removed from the living room, since Hedda insists on *removing* the piano and not on replacing it with the writing table.

A very simple explanation to this change might be that this was one of Hedda's many whims. As for the substitution of the piano with a "little writing table", one might simply refer to the nineteenth-century fashion of interior decoration which expressed almost a horror of empty spaces. The empty space where the piano used to be would need, simply, to be filled by something else.¹⁸ Case closed. Or is it? I find, like Northam, that "when Ibsen takes the trouble to alter an apparently insignificant point of visual detail [...] he is probably adding something of significance" (1953:13). Indeed, as we have already seen, the dialogue preceding this change is rich with metaphoric meanings. Also, the change itself has complex deeper meanings.

Both the writing table and the piano belong to Hedda. "In a broader perspective", finds Sæther, "the text embodies a suggestion of alternative areas of activity for Hedda. This is linked precisely to art, music and writing – the 'poetic'" (2001:441). I will discuss more about art as her possible "purpose in life" within her gendered status in the chapter "The Piano as an Instrument for Ritual Transcendence". However, in Tesman's, or a "collector's" living room (see Benjamin 1986), a writing desk with a bookcase, which presupposes rational activity seems to "fit in" more with "all the other things" than the piano which, which can be a means for a person to unleash her inner emotional states and irrational forces.

In the inner room, which by the end of the play eventually rooms all her possessions, Hedda will, closing the curtains behind her, eventually take her life, shooting herself in the temple. As a result, the inner room is usually interpreted as Hedda's own. In a draft, Ibsen is explicit: Hedda is referring to the inner room as her "own sitting room" (Ibsen 1966:277).¹⁹

The salon was in the nineteenth century a space where intimate actions were forbidden and any display of private or overly emotional outbursts were considered inadequate.²⁰ Hedda is maybe more than other Ibsen's characters obsessed by the fear of exposing her inner state

¹⁸ The notion of "horror vacui" of the nineteenth-century interiors (Löfgren 1984:46). Cf. chapter 3.1 in this thesis, 20

¹⁹ Many Ibsen critics, thus, point towards the inner room as Hedda's own (Rekdal 2000, Norseng 2001, Sæther 2001, Durbach 1971, among others). Kittang, for example, says: "Etter hvert – og særlig i sluttscenen – blir bakværelset på en måte Heddas eget rom, kontrasten til det andre rommet der hun er en fremmed" which the critic poignantly calls "godhetens fengsel", or "the prison of kindness" (2006:104). Some have even taken it a step further by applying Freudian terms. Critics such as James H. Clancy see it as a cave or womb to which Hedda repeatedly returns during the course of the play (1972).

²⁰ Cf. chapter 3.1. in this thesis.

in public. The text makes conspicuous the change in the heroine's behavior when she is in the company of others and when she is alone. In the salon, she always bears a cold, distinguished appearance. Conversely, in the few moments of privacy, her inner frustration and desolation come clearly forth.

Hedda repeatedly recoils to the inner room at moments of mental distress. Opening the act four, the text accounts of a Hedda, dressed in black, impatiently waiting to hear news about Eliert Løvborg. She has previously given him one of her father's pistols, encouraging him to commit suicide, poetically asking: "Eilert Løvborg—listen to me. Couldn't you arrange that – that it's done beautifully?" (Ibsen 1978:761):

HEDDA, dressed in black, is pacing back and forth in the dark room. She then enters the inner room, moving out of sight toward the left. Several chords are heard on the piano. She comes in view again, returning into the drawing room (763).

The only glimpses of Hedda's real psychological state, beyond her distinctive façade of calm and control, only occur in moments of privacy or when Hedda enters the inner room of the house. The text suggests that there exists a peculiar correlation between Hedda's inner self and the inner room of the house.

Benjamin has suggested that there exists an "essential resemblance or interdependence" of the two meanings of the word "interior", which came into widespread use in the nineteenth-century. The "phantasmagoria of the interior" had its "part in the advent of modern life", finds Benjamin (as quoted in Rosner 2005:129). In effect, "the interior" can mean both "one's inner nature" and the "inside of a particular space". "Interior" of a space, as opposed to "exterior", was a paradigm repeated in the distinction between "private" and "public". This further presupposed that the same binary functioned within the subjects moving through those spaces. Thus, according to Benjamin, the idea of a person's "double nature" arose as well. The exterior "nature" of a person, her social façade, was revealed in public, whereas in private occasions she could live her true, interior "nature". The division between the private and the public spaces within a house was furthered by the division between a private and a public man (Sennett 1990, 1993). Hedda's character is marked by this double, inter-related sense of the word "interior".

The salon is in many ways a hostile place for Hedda. First and foremost, it is a public space where Hedda must keep the "appearances", or an identity tableau, at all times. According to Sennett, a "respectable" person is distinguished by the ability to "control his feelings through silence" and the restraint of emotions (1993:206). The Victorianist John Kucich

believes that the nineteenth-century literature often presented the effects of what he terms “the nineteenth-century cultural decision to value silenced or negated feeling over affirmed feeling”, which further created “the corresponding cultural prohibitions placed on display, disclosure, confession, assertion” (1987:3). In public, Hedda needed to suppress what might give offence.

As a result, Hedda is sure to correct the outbursts of emotions of her “little friend” Thea Elvsted: “HEDDA (*pinching her arm*): They can hear you!” and “Thea—be careful, Thea!” (Ibsen 1978:744, 769). Hedda is maintaining the pretence of calm and controlled behavior, at once expressing an oversensitive “fear of scandal”, or what Sennett will later call the nineteenth-century man’s “fear of exposure”: “[It] is in one way a militarized conception of everyday experience, as though attack-and-defense is as apt a model of subjective life as it is of warfare... the differences between people are more likely to be mutually threatening than mutually stimulating” (1990:xii). Indeed, Hedda is deathly afraid of anything that might taint her impeccable reputation, which is intrinsically connected with her fear of being in somebody’s power: “[n]ot free. Not free, then! (*Rises impetuously.*) No – I can’t bear the thought of it. Never!” (Ibsen 1978:776). Templeton, consequently, interprets Hedda’s suicide as a result of the insurmountable gap between the private and the public (1997:224).

As a consequence, she constructs a place of spiritual refuge, “a geography of safety” (Sennett 1990:21) equipped with relics from her past life. The inner room in the Tesman household represents exactly this haven of privacy for Hedda and a place where she can maintain a personal integrity under attack. The living-room is filled with elements which belong to the Tesman “tight little world [she has] stumbled into” (Ibsen 1978:730), and which further threaten to taint her with Tesman “absurdities”. As a defense mechanism, while she “stages” her nobility, marking her distinction in front of others, Hedda is at once constructing her own “magic space” where she protects and internalizes her (bygone) identity. In this sense, Hedda’s apathy and narcissistic void, as well as her recoil into the empty room, has many elements of melancholia, as Julia Kristeva formulates it in *Black Sun. Depression and Melancholia* (1989). Hedda is drawn to her inner room, a melancholy space, or a crypt, in an escape from time and recoil into her self.

The piano, the pistols and the portrait of her father are the protagonist’s possessions which represent and perpetuate her Gabler identity. Her material possessions constitute an important part in the objectification of her “real” self. The text accounts how they are one by one

gathered in the inner room by the last scene in the drama.²¹ Mary Key Norseng suggests that this is a conscious act in Hedda's suicide scenario (2001:222). She finally sacrifices herself before the portrait, in an act that is, according to Durbach, formally demonstrating the Gabler values "without which life is worthless, [in] a form of *hara-kiri* in which both the weapon and the nature of the suicidal act [...] demonstrate the grandeur of the principles which necessitate such sacrifice." (1971:156). If we interpret, thus, the inner room as Hedda's sanctuary, an almost religious shrine of Gablerism, then the objects she surrounds herself with are also adorned with a sacral aura. Hedda "does not want to part" with the piano. Here, the text suggests that the protagonist almost feels a visceral connection to this object. Ibsen meticulously constructs the protagonist's particular bond with the piano: this object is Hedda's companion in the unbearable circumstances of her new life.

4.4. THE PIANO AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR RITUAL TRANSCENDENCE

In the last act, Hedda realizes that all her projects have backfired, that they were no more than what Judge Brack calls a "beautiful illusion" (Ibsen 1978:772). "That too! What is it, this – this curse that everything I touch turns ridiculous and vile?" exclaims Hedda after hearing that Eilert Løvborg did not shoot himself of his own free will. What is worse, he was found shot in "Mademoiselle Diana's boudoir" (773) with a fatal wound: "HEDDA. In the chest–yes. BRACK. No–in the stomach–more or less." (ibid.)

What she has envisaged as Eilert Løvborg's ordeal of beauty, "a free and courageous action [...]. Something that shimmers with spontaneous beauty" (772) is shattered by the "ridiculous and vile" reality. But, there is even more, there is "[a]nother ugly aspect to the case" (773), says Judge Brack. He has recognized the weapon used to kill Løvborg. It was one of General Gabler's pistols, arguably one of the set of two dueling pistols (Roll-Hansen 2006). He threatens to expose Hedda's involvement in the whole affair which will, among other things, provoke a scandal "the kind [Hedda is] so deathly afraid of" and make her appear in court alongside with Mademoiselle Diana" (775), a red-haired "singer". This is utterly unthinkable for a Gabler: "HEDDA (*decisively*). I'd rather die!" (ibid.). She sees no other way out from her situation than its metaphoric transcendence: death.

²¹ In the last act of the play Hedda takes the case with the general's pistols – "object covered with sheet music from under the bookcase" (Ibsen 1978:774) into that room.

Brack continues to spine the web, insinuating that from that moment he would be also sexually in power over her. The claustrophobic walls of the Tesman salon have never seemed so tight: “HEDDA. [...] I’m in your power. Tied to your will and desire. Not free. Not free, then! (*Rises impetuously.*) No – I can’t bear the thought of it. Never!” (776)

She can no longer turn to Tesman and Mrs. Elvsted who are busy with “the melancholy work” of setting Eilert Løvborg’s notes together. Preoccupied with the comically few remaining notes, Tesman explains to Hedda that there is “nothing that the two of [them] need from [her] now” (777). Left with the feelings of being superfluous, her illusion of a life in beauty shattered, threatened with a scandal, a prospect sexual abuse, and most importantly with the feeling of captivity, Hedda makes her suicide scenario.²²

Utterly self-composed, keeping the aristocratic “appearances”, Hedda withdraws into her spiritual refuge and private sanctuary “that houses the inheritances of her Gabler life” (Templeton 1997:228):

HEDDA: [...] I’m tired this evening. I want to rest a while in there on the sofa [...] (HEDDA *goes into the inner room, pulling the curtains closed after her. Short pause. Suddenly, she is heard playing a wild dance melody on the piano.*) (777).

After exchanging a few last, sarcastic, replicas with the rest of the characters through the closed curtains, Hedda kills herself demonstrating that she can do what Løvborg could not: commit a free and courageous deed which “shimmers with spontaneous beauty” (772).

Rather than focusing deeper into the reasons as to why Hedda shoots herself, which has been a burning question ever since the play appeared (Rekdal 2001:9-17), I will pose another question. Namely, why is Hedda playing a “wild dance melody” on the piano moments before her suicide? It is, as we read, Hedda’s last action before pulling the trigger. How is one to interpret this (symbolic) act?

On the level of the plot, it functions as an overture to one of the most striking examples of what Moi calls the anti-spectacular or anti-theatrical deaths in Ibsen’s oeuvre (2001). The critic argues that Ibsen’s plays abound with examples of purposeful anti-theatricality aiming to “neutralize any awareness of the presence of the beholder” (2001:29). Referring to Hedvig’s death from *The Wild Duck* which is an obvious parallel to *Hedda Gabler*, Moi points out that “[i]n the pictorial aesthetics of the melodrama, [her] death would have been placed center stage” (42).

²² As Astrid Sæther argues in “*Hedda Gabler* and Nietzschean Creativity”, Hedda’s suicide is a planned one, and not unexpected and whimsical (2001).

Death is a private matter in the bourgeoisie (Ariès 1991), and also Hedda's death happens out of sight of the audience, the reader and the other characters in the play. Her death stands in clear opposition to Løvborg's scandalous bohemian public death on the one side, and Aunt Rina's "so calm, so beautiful", death (Ibsen 1978:763) which expresses the ideal of a proper burgher, on the other. In the paradigm of public versus private, I believe that it may be said that Hedda's death to contain elements of both, but is, however, neither of the two.

She secludes into her private, intimate "magic space" where she can finally fully asserts her Gabler identity, surrounded by her symbolic possessions – relics from her past. Moments before her death, however, Hedda expresses her final revolt against the bourgeois ideology which she was fighting during the whole course of the drama. By means of her particularly planned death, Hedda rebels against the ideal of a "calm and beautiful" death. Quite purposefully, before the fatal shot, she plays a "wild dance melody" much to the shock of everybody else in the living room:

MRS.ELVSTED (*starting up from her chair*). Oh–what is that?

TESMAN (*running to the center doorway*). But Hedda dearest–don't go playing dance music tonight! Think of Auntie Rina! And Eilert, too!

HEDDA (*putting her head out between the curtains*). And Auntie Julie. And all the rest of them. From now on I'll be quiet. (*She closes the curtains again.*) (777)

Shortly after, a gunshot is heard. The symbolism of her "wild dance tune" is manifold. On the one hand, by playing a loud dance melody in a house where two deaths have recently been announced, Hedda marks her final resistance to the petty bourgeois practices. Second, the piano thus becomes Hedda's final refuge: a much hoped-for aesthetic transcendent for her situation. Also, it is factually an artistic "channeling [of] her anarchic energies towards a decisive act of willed control, dying beneath the portrait [...]" (Durbach 1971:158) by which she demonstrates the grandeur of the Gabler principles.

According to the anthropologist Gilbert Rouget, music is usually the essential part of any ritual of sacrifice is (Rouget 1985). Hedda's sacrifice to her Gabler-identity irresistibly brings to mind the ritualistic human self-sacrifices. The music accompanying a ritual is usually loud and rhythmical calling for an enraptured dance. According to Nietzsche, ecstasy is achieved most easily through dance (1993:20). The rhythmical music of a dance which moves both the body and the mind in a whirl, provides, according to Rouget, the participants with a feeling of ecstatic unconsciousness which gives way for the passage, or transcendence of the self and a metaphysical reunion with a higher force (1985). The higher force for Hedda is her father, or his totemic presentation: the portrait before which Hedda stands and fires the

fatal shot. Indeed, Hedda's final artistic action is not a pure musical performance. Her piano playing is the necessary element of the "hara-kiri" (Durbach 1971:156) which, as it may be, sets her mind in a specific state of trance, giving her the determination to commit the act.

The idea that music gives direct insight into one's soul was not uniquely Nietzsche's, although it was he who formulated it most poignantly. This was the common nineteenth-century belief, and was shared by many Ibsen's contemporaries (Wagner, Tolstoy and Flaubert, for instance). Therefore, Ibsen's Hedda purposefully plays "a dance tune" in this decisive moment. As a result, I would agree with Sæther who concludes, that Hedda's death is not an impulsive act, as has been often claimed (2001). It is a well-staged, and finally successful, ritual of self-sacrifice.²³ By means her self-obliteration, Hedda paradoxically hopes to conduct a self-affirming act. In fact, only a metaphoric transcendence from her current situation is possible. Hedda, cannot, like Nora, physically leave the salon, and step out from her identity within it. She cannot contest the premises of society – "discover who's right, the world or [she]" (Ibsen 1978:193). Moral escape is Hedda's only way out, and it happens with dignity and triumph, essentially through an aesthetic and artistic act. In such a desperate, helpless state of oppressive "voicelessness", music is her expressive, creative outlet.

The Piano: an aesthetic escape from the petty bourgeois domesticity

Hedda Gabler abounds with parallels to Nietzsche's thought. Ibsen critics such as Asbjørn Aarseth (1999), Gunnar Brandell (1993) and Hayden V. White (1966) read in the character of George Tesman a clear echo of Nietzsche's criticism of historiography. However, for me, the comparison with another Nietzsche's work from the same period seems more relevant. I am referring to *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (1872). Ibsen's conception, as expressed in *Hedda Gabler*, on the role of music for individual human beings has many similarities with Nietzsche's underlying idea from *The Birth of Tragedy* on the opposition/tension between the Apollonian and Dionysian principles in art in general, and music in particular.

²³ In *Hedda Gabler*, Ibsen yet again intertwines dance music and death. The music she plays is both life-affirming and obliterating. For inherent in *dance* is the notion of vitality, but in Hedda's case this vitality is inseparable from its opposite: death. As Atle Kittang observed, "Hedda's 'wild dance melody' brings forth the associations to Nora's wild tarantella-dance, but it simultaneously points forward to the *Danse macabre* in *John Gabriel Borkman*" (2006:110).

It is possible that Ibsen had little knowledge of Nietzsche's ideas (Haakonsen 2003). However, the philosopher's stands from the book spring from the age's general thought on art and music. Starting with Arthur Schopenhauer's works with the underlying idea that music alone could express one's will, one's inner being, music as a specific art form became a central topic in the German philosophical thought. Schopenhauer's ideas were furthered by Nietzsche and Richard Wagner, both in his theoretical and musical works (Wagner 1970). I believe that it would be very surprising that Ibsen was not aware of this.²⁴

Nietzsche has gone furthest in explaining the essential distinction of music in relation to other arts. Representational aesthetic forms: sculpture and painting have mostly "Apollonian" qualities; that is, they are principally bound with order and the plastic: everything which is clear and perceptible. The "Dionysian", however, stands for ecstasy, a deeper reality, intoxication, life and death, ritual and chaos. This is where music and dancing essentially belong. The highest art form, however, is a mixture of both the Apollonian and the Dionysian elements, and it is the drama. At its purest, it would allow the spectator (or reader) to experience the whole spectrum of human condition: both its Apollonian and Dionysian aspects. In literature, many writers across Europe echoed this thought, for example André Gide, but also Ibsen.

These principles in arts are, according to Nietzsche, further transposed into human beings. The philosopher claims that life always involves a struggle between the two. According to Haakonsen, in the beginning of *Hedda Gabler*, Ibsen accounts for a bourgeois home where a latent (Dionysian) disorder hidden within the daily social routines. These, however, unexpectedly emerge during the play (2003:128). The Dionysian in *Hedda Gabler* has "its clearest representative in the gifted but drunken author, Eilert Løvborg", according to Sæther (2001:438). However, the wild, destructive, but potentially creative Dionysian power is also a trait recognizable in the play's protagonist. All Hedda's symbolic actions, such as the burning of the manuscript – Thea's child, her ritual suicide, playing with the pistols and so forth, can be seen as moments when Hedda's inner Dionysian chaos breaks through.

Hedda's death has often been interpreted as a result of the patriarchal society, and its gender norms suffocating her capabilities. In her study of the history of reception of *Hedda Gabler*, Kari Fjørtoft points out that Ibsen's female contemporary critics considered the play as a plausible psychological portrait of all the oppressed women with a burning desire for a

²⁴ Ibsen comments in 1888, that *Keiser og Galilæer* was the first of his works which was influenced by the German thought (as quoted in Haakonsen 2003:127).

better life (1986:97). Indeed, also in the later Ibsen criticism (Rønning 2007, Kittang 2006, Sæther 2001, Aarseth 1999, Orr 1981, et al.), Hedda tends to be seen as a gifted, energetic woman who tragically fails to unfold her talents due to her gender limitations within the “prison of (petty bourgeois) kindness” (Kittang 2006) which is the marriage with Tesman. This is what, according to Rekdal, subsequently causes Hedda to act destructively (2001:10). Sæther notes that “Hedda is a representative of the female destiny of the 19th century, shut up in the patriarchy, without a man’s rights and possibilities” (2001:435). Further discussing Hedda’s gendered frame of action, the critic finds that “the text embodies a suggestion of alternative areas of activity for Hedda. This is linked precisely to art, music and writing – ‘the poetic’” (441) – Dionysian areas of activity.

Taking Ibsen’s comment to the play’s protagonist as a point of departure, namely that “[w]ith Hedda there is deep poetry at bottom” (Ibsen 1966:482), Sæther emphasizes, that it is specifically important to remember that “music is [Hedda’s] final expression” (Sæther 2001:441), a thought which will later be developed by other scholars, such as for instance Kittang (2006). This is also the central idea of Nietzsche’s thought about music being the ultimate and most sublime human expression: “[a]ll possible strivings, impulses, and expressions of the will, all those processes which take place within the heart of man, are to be expressed through the infinite number of possible melodies” (Nietzsche 2008:87).

Drawing on Sæther, I will discuss this act of the play’s protagonist as an indication of her potential “purpose in life” or subliming activity within her gender-based identity in the “salon”. To begin with, I shall focus on the fact that Hedda’s therapeutic instrument is precisely a piano, and not, for example, a flute, or a violin.

Hedda’s ability to play the piano, and the fact that she owns one, belongs to her education of a rich senior civil servant’s daughter.²⁵ It was one of the basic activities a *wife* was encouraged to practice in a bourgeois home. For Hedda, however, piano playing is not only an “accomplishments”. She clearly elevates from regular bourgeois wives, also on this field. The text gives indications that Hedda is indeed a versatile musician, being able to play more than just a light menuett or rondo. In the bourgeois ideology, airs and waltzes were more praised than concertos (Loesser 1954:269). The piano gives Hedda a rare possibility for an aesthetic escapade from the quenching reality she “has stumbled into”. Turned into Tesman’s

²⁵ It is perplexing that Hedda should bring into the marriage with Tesman only so few personal items. Could this be an indication that her inheritance was insignificant? If so, did she marry Tesman after or before her father’s death?

wife, she has become deprived from her other ordinary pleasures: horseback riding and attending balls. Subversively, however, music being her only outlet, clearly points to her entrapment within her gendered existence where she is essentially hindered from any other, more productive activity.

However, this “aesthetic escapade” is itself also of a very limited range in the Tesman salon. Not only is Hedda supposed to refrain from any display of uncontrolled feelings, she was also expected to behave according to the (petty) bourgeois credo: “there is a time and place for everything” (Löfgren 1984:51): “TESMAN. No, for heaven’s sake, Hedda darling – don’t touch those dangerous things! [---] But Hedda dearest – don’t go playing dance music tonight!” (Ibsen 1978: 721, 777). Only through her pistols and her piano can she “release her fury, her suppressed passion” (Sæther 2001:440) – articulate all the nuances of her inner self.

Loesser, finds that “piano is the individualist’s instrument for nursing the illusion that he is a host in himself. With bare hands and intermittent foot he can unleash quasi-symphonic storms and discharge the tensions” (1954:viii). According to G. A. Briggs, the piano has a distinctive structure among instruments. It has a “wide frequency and dynamic range as well as an infinite variety of tone color available to the player” (Briggs 1951:13). As such, the piano is a flawless “seismograph” of Hedda’s soul. Piano is the instrument which, by its singular technical features, allows Hedda to fully express her inner chaos which she otherwise must not expose or unleash. Thus, I believe that the piano can be said to be allegorically Hedda’s prosthetic “voice” repressed in the Tesman salon. Taken even a step further, I find that the text subtly implies an essential likeness or identification between Hedda and her piano.

The piano as Hedda’s twin figure

The protagonist of this drama is, as we have seen, from the very beginning of the play connected and directed to the piano. In fact, I believe that the text might be suggesting an identification of the two. Norseng is the only critic who has considered this thought.. Specifically focusing on the moment when the piano, “the only piece of furniture which was [Hedda’s]” (my translation Norseng 2001:222), is moved she implicitly identifies the two by interpreting this change as the dramatist’s subtle indication that Hedda herself is soon going to be removed.

However, this identification is suggested even earlier in the text. The piano is, as established earlier, one of the few relics from her previous life which she brings into the new, unknown and menacing life where she “has stumbled into” by marrying Tesman. When Hedda points to her “old” piano’s misplacement in the Tesman’s salon, she is metaphorically alluding to her own misplacement in this petty-bourgeois entourage. As the title of my analysis of the drama I used Hedda’s melancholy words: “HEDDA. I’m just looking at my old piano. It doesn’t really seem to fit in with all these other things” (Ibsen 1978:706). She is here not really talking about her piano, but about herself. Mourning over her piano, Hedda actually mourns over herself. Thus, she does not only see the piano as a companion in the unbearable circumstances. For her the piano is actually her twin figure, or at least her inextricable part.

My chief argument for this claim lies in the fundamental interdependence of the two. The fact that the piano is a means by which Hedda can express herself, made me seek for the possibility of interpreting the piano as Hedda’s missing, or repressed, “voice”. In this context, inspiring for me was Barthold Halle’s production of *Hedda Gabler* by the Oslo Nye Dukketeater from 1994. The puppet representing Hedda was, apart from the face, entirely made of a fabric with the piano’s keyboard as the pattern. Whenever it appeared on stage, it was accompanied by piano music. Thus, the mute puppet gained a voice. This, again, brought to my mind Jane Campion’s 1993 movie called *The Piano*. One of the movie’s most memorable scenes presents a trio of nineteenth-century émigrés stranded on an empty New Zealand beach: the film’s protagonist, the mute Ada, all dressed in black, her illegitimate young daughter Flora and her grand piano. The film’s elaborate conceit is that the piano is much a subject as an object, serving as Ada’s prosthetic voice. The unusual symbiosis between the two animates the instrument also, endowing it, for characters and audience alike, with figurative agency. This movie abounds with citations to nineteenth-century texts and culture. According to the Victorianist Cora Kaplan, “[t]he film is not only one of the most intricate examples of Victoriana to date, but a knowing, sophisticated meta-commentary on it” (Kaplan 2007:119).

The Piano and *Hedda Gabler* have almost a parallel narrative. Both Ada and Hedda are married off to a stranger, found in foreign surroundings where everything seems to be menacing. The piano is for both their only link to their cultural and social context. Further, the dependence on the piano is their metaphoric “voice” is extreme. The symbolic attachment of the protagonists to this object is cultivated and stressed in both narratives. A further analogy

between the two narratives is that which in both cases they pre-suppose a conflation between women and things. The piano in *Hedda Gabler*, as I read it, has been the medium of Hedda's tragic mode, acting as a kind of perfidious companion that gives her "voice" but also functions as her twin female figure.

Both Hedda and Ada have sold themselves in the marriage: Eilert Løvborg explicitly formulates it in the text (Ibsen 1978:736).²⁶ The nineteenth-century value of women as objects of exchange between men is a recurring motif in Ibsen's works, as well as Campion's film (this is one of the central motifs in *John Gabriel Borkman* and *When We Dead Awaken*, for instance). Tesman's part of the "deal" on which their marriage is founded is that he would provide Hedda with the pleasures she was used to: a luxurious house, balls, riding horse, and a butler. Hedda's asset was herself, and her status. For Tesman, Hedda is a "sign" – a mode of communication between other men:

MISS TESMAN. No, but to think of it, that now you're a married man! And that it was you who carried off Hedda Gabler. The beautiful Hedda Gabler! Imagine! She, who always had so many admirers.
TESMAN (*hums a little and smiles complacently*). Yes, I rather suspect I have several friends who'd like to trade places with me. (699)

²⁶ See page 47.

5. IT'S THAT MUSIC THERE - THAT'S WHAT'S HOUNDING ME OUT OF THIS HOUSE: JOHN GABRIEL BORKMAN

5.1 INTERIOR AND ITS IMPLICATIONS: THE PIANO AS BORKMAN'S TOOL

Borkman's dwelling-place has been, according to the critic Mark Sandberg: "kept definitively and tantalizingly offstage throughout the first act" (2006:335). Indeed, the reader gets insight in it only in the second act, even though it has been affecting the plot from the beginning:

The former grand salon upstairs in the Rentheim house. The walls are covered with old tapestries, depicting hunting scenes, shepherds and shepherdesses, in faded, mottled colors. In the wall to the left, a sliding door, and closer in the foreground, a piano. In the left rear corner, an unframed door decorated with tapestry to blend with the background. At the middle of the right-hand wall, a large carved oak desk, with many books and papers. Further forward on the same side, a sofa, along with a table and chairs. All the furniture is in austere Empire style. On the desk and table, lighted lamps.
(Ibsen 1978:967)

As opposed to the interiors from *A Doll House* and *Hedda Gabler*, Borkman's salon is conspicuously less elaborate. The living-rooms of Nora and Hedda are overburdened with furniture, sofas, chairs, bric-a-bracs, souvenirs, majolica ornaments, chairs, taborets and so forth. Here, we note that the only pieces of furniture are a piano, a desk, one sofa, one table and a couple of chairs.

The text may give some clues as to what type of piano this might be. The piano in *A Doll House* is probably a smaller, upright pianoforte, the so-called "cabinet piano". These were circa one meter high and particularly common in the bourgeois households which, due to their narrow space could by no means house a grand or baby grand piano (Loesser 1954:141). The rooms in *Hedda Gabler* are undoubtedly considerably bigger. The salon of a respectable villa would most probably have a grand piano. Taking into account Hedda's decent, one can further assume that Ibsen was referring to a grand piano in this drama. The piano in John Gabriel Borkman's salon might also very well be a grand piano. Ibsen's text gives a little clue which would support this: when Frida Foldal, the pianist, leaves Borkman alone in the salon, he "goes over to the piano, about to close it, then lets it be" (Ibsen 1978:970). The piano is thus equipped with a lock, which is a feature of only baby grand or grand pianos.

Such a black massive piano imposes as the dominating element in "all the emptiness surrounding" John Gabriel Borkman (970). As well as the other furniture, the piano is in "austere Empire style". This style was in fashion during the reign of Napoleon the First. Even

though it remained longer in vogue in the Scandinavian countries, it must have already been outdated in the 1890s and at the moment when the action of the play is set. The principal characteristic of the Empire style is the use of ormolu details on black surfaces. Pianos from that period had elaborately curved feet which mimed lion's paws, and were usually made in heavy oak.

In order to understand what meanings the piano has to the protagonist, it is called for a brief account of the background story of the play. Borkman is a former bank manager who has used both his own, and the bank's capital in dubious enterprises in the sectors of new industry. At the peak of his career, he had the power as great as that of a monarch, or more specifically Napoleon, Borkman's personal gauge. The Borkman family once enjoyed big wealth and status; as Mrs. Gunhild Borkman narrates to her sister Ella Rentheim:

MRS. BORKMAN (*scornfully*). Yes, I always heard that we had to "set the style". So he set the style all right – to a fault! Drove a four-in-hand – as if he were a king. Let people bow and scrape to him, as if to a king. (Ibsen 1978:947)

However, Borkman's machinations were revealed, and for having misused the bank's money he was sentenced to jail. His bankruptcy entailed the downfall of others:

MRS. BORKMAN (*dully*): No, I can't understand it! I never will! I can't comprehend how anything like this – anything so appalling could overwhelm one family! And that it's *our* family! A family so distinguished! Why did it have to strike *us*!
ELLA. Oh, Gunhild – there were many, many besides *our* family struck with that blow. (946)

The "blow" that the sisters Ella Rentheim and Gunhild Borkman refer to points to the events taking place in Norway at the time. A number of Ibsen scholars particularly emphasize this aspect of the drama (Rønning 1976/77, Beyer 1979, et al.), arguing that John Gabriel Borkman is a case-study for the multitude of entrepreneurs who rose to the heights and bankrupted during the "prodigious dynamism of the nineteenth century" as Fjelde calls the modernization process of the Norwegian society and economy (Ibsen 1978:938).

According to Norwegian historiography, the process of the country's industrialization gained pace from the 1870s on. It met with a period of stagnation which lasted "for a decade (1877-87), but there then followed a number of years of moderate growth, which merged into a period of rapid growth in the second half of the 1890s" (Danielsen 1995:271-272). Norway's most important industries were iron and engineering:

Mining also experienced increased growth in the 1890s. New technology made it possible to exploit lower quality iron ore and other mineral deposits. Foreign capital created new, vigorous mining communities (Sulitjelma and Kirkenes) and revived old ones (Folldal and Løkken) (282).²⁷

The entrepreneurs who were heading these sectors, such as Ibsen's Borkman, had in fact all the power of autocrats. However, in the turbulent modernization times machinations and insecure investments could either lead to tremendous income and prosperity – or bankruptcy.

After the trial for the misuse of the bank's capital, Borkman spent five years in prison. Upon release, he spent another eight years in voluntary isolation on the second floor of the Rentheim family estate. As a result of the bankruptcy, all of the family's property was sold. From a life where "[e]verything had to be so impossibly luxurious" (Ibsen 1978:946), the Borkman family became dependent on Ella Rentheim who lent them her family estate.

Even the piano in Borkman's salon is, thus, not his property. It belongs, like the rest of the house, to Ella. Even so, it is unquestionably Borkman's attribute, functioning, I would claim, as an "externalization" of his (former) identity and giving validity to his illusion that it is only a matter of time before he re-attains his former position: "BORKMAN (*exultantly*). But they'll come! They're coming! You wait! Any day, any hour, I can expect them here. And as you see, I hold myself in readiness to welcome them" (974). The piano is, thus, simultaneously a symbol of Borkman's past, and an assertion or objectification of his illusory future.

This paradox brings us to a very interesting, and much discussed, aspect of *John Gabriel Borkman* – the play's concept of time. Ibsen's contemporary dramas are famous for their retrospective technique. Nevertheless, according to Peter Szondi, *John Gabriel Borkman* stands as an exception. In his *Theorie des modernen Dramas* from 1956, Szondi finds that the drama entirely themes the past. As a consequence, Szondi concludes that the play has predominantly epic qualities. Frode Helland makes a discussion with Szondi, arguing that Ibsen does not theme past, rather, that time in *John Gabriel Borkman* is but "an empty, mechanical repetition" (2000:307).

I believe, however, that if one focuses on Borkman's relation to the piano, one will find a possibility for yet a third interpretation. Borkman's piano is an object in which the past, present and future constantly intertwine in a blurred category which is, in my opinion, neither

²⁷ Is it merely a coincidence that a character in the play – Vilhelm Foldal should bear the name quite similar to the name of one of the ore mines? I believe not, interpreting this as yet another Ibsen's link in the drama to the contemporary Norwegian affairs.

of the three. The piano seems in fact to be Borkman's specific tool by which the very passing of time is negated.

Kamilla Aslaksen proposes that "everything which surrounds Borkman is actually a tableau which *he* arranges himself": "alt som omgir Borkman; den mørke salen uten et vindu, det stive empiremøblementet, pasjonen for mollstemt musikk osv. egentlig er et av ham oppstilt tablå, en omhyggelig oppbygd iscenesettelse" (1993:119). This modernist aspect of Ibsen's plays has been discussed very much in the recent Ibsen scholarship (also Helland 2000, Moi 2006, Østerud 1993). According to the theories of Baudrillard (1988, 1996) and Bourdieu (1984), objects, clothing style and manners are all clear signs of one's identity. By means of the objects which surround him, Borkman creates an impression that the passing of time has no effect on his identity: through them, to paraphrase Habermas, Borkman simply stages his own identity to himself and others (Habermas 1989:8). Therefore, Borkman's piano is not a symbol of his "bygone days", rather, it is a symbol of an atemporal, perpetual identity.

By the inherent socio-cultural dialectics of "the most respectable of all instruments" (Loesser 1954:250), Borkman does not aim to stop or reverse time as, for example, Hedda Gabler does. Of course, he laments over the unfortunate turn of events that has taken place, passionately remembering his old days. However, he nurtures a belief that the "old days" have, in fact, not ceased, that he still *is* the John Gabriel whom "all called by his forename, exactly like the king himself" (Ibsen 1978:947). Borkman is cocooned in the salon, surrounded by his eternalizing objects, waiting for the moment when the world would set him back up on his throne:

BORKMAN. [...] When the hour of restitution strikes for me – when they realize that they can't dispense with me – when they come up to me here in this room [...] (*He poses by the desk as before and strikes his chest.*) *Here's* where I'll stand and greet them! (973)

In short, Borkman simply negates the effect of the thirteen years that passed, by making himself, and others believe that he still is the same "almighty" John Gabriel. In the salon upstairs, time seems to have stopped, as Borkman paces "from morning to night" during eight years. As one may have noticed in the stage description of Borkman's dwelling, the former grand salon has not one single window. Isolated in a room with no windows, Borkman is not only excluded from society, he is also excluded from time. Days and nights, time, does not exist for one confined to a room with only artificial lighting. The old bourgeois "grand salon", becomes, thus, a macabre capsule where time and place seem to be standing still. It therefore achieves the metaphoric aspects of a prison, or taken a step further, those of a coffin.

5.2. SALON: BORKMAN'S DEATH CHAMBER

“BORKMAN. The walls would close in and crush me – grind me flat as a fly” (Ibsen 1978:1018). With these words, standing on the porch of the house in the last act of the drama, the protagonist vehemently refuses to return to the lethal “four walls” of the salon. He has literally never left it during eight years.

MRS. BORKMAN: He never goes out.

ELLA: Not even at dusk.

MRS. BORKMAN: Never. [...] And every so often – late in the evening – I hear him coming down – to put on his things and go out. But then he stops, usually halfway down the stairs – and turns back. Back to the salon. (Ibsen 1978:952)

All the time during his self-imposed ostracism, however, Borkman nurtures a great illusion of returning to the society and re-establishing himself as the king of finance and entrepreneurship. Borkman is, thus, paradoxically both yearning for the outdoors, the exterior, and dreading it, utterly afraid to perform the decisive step out from the “four walls” where he paces to and fro like a “sick wolf in a cage”. Aarseth finds that *John Gabriel Borkman* is a play about isolation and a dream of freedom: “[t]ematisk handler også dette Ibsen-dramaet om innestenthets og frihetsdrøm, og motsetningene kan synes mer ekstreme, uforsonlige og akutte enn i noen av de tidligere verkene” (1999:333). Helge Rønning is also among the Ibsen critics who have dedicated considerable attention to the relations between exterior and interior in this play (2001 and 2007). He finds that Borkman, like other protagonists in Ibsen’s last plays, is bound to make up dreams about open spaces in order to “compensate for an existence in closed rooms without exits” (2001:431). It proves to be a fatal dream – Borkman literally dies in the fourth act upon deserting the indoors.

The yearning for freedom beyond the “four walls” of the Rentheim mansion is expressed by all the characters in the play. It is formulated in the young generation’s impulsive and thoughtless claim: “I want to live, live, live!” (Ibsen 1978:1003). Heeding this call, the young Erhart Borkman breaks free from “roses and lavender – stale indoor air” in the last act of the play. If life is outside, then the indoors are a place of death.

Indeed, in *John Gabriel Borkman* the bourgeois salon, which has been the recurrent space of dwelling in Ibsen’s later dramas, attains its most macabre image, with the piano as its hallmark. The Rentheim mansion, carries the sign of death: “[d]en borgerlige ‘dagligstue’ [...] bærer dødens merke” (Helland 2000:293). The interior Ibsen creates in *John Gabriel Borkman* is more than “an interior for older people” (Aarseth 1999:309). Rather, “the Rentheim family estate” (Ibsen 1978:941) has already from the opening of the play wrapped

in an atmosphere of “ephemeral life, a life of the dead” (Helland 2000:295): the “life” presented on stage seems to be more like its opposite – death.

All rooms in the house are equally coffin-like: deathly cold and quiet. On the ground floor we read of “MRS. BORKMAN’s *living room, furnished in old-fashioned, faded elegance*”. Through the windows in the background “*a snowstorm [swirling] in the dusk*” is to be seen. In the room there is a “*large old iron stove with a fire burning in it*”, “*a window hung with heavy curtains*”, “*a sofa covered in horsehair*”, “*a high-backed armchair*” near the stove, finally “*a table with a cloth on it*” and “*a lighted lamp with a shade*” (Ibsen 1978:943). As a consequence, Edvard Munch called *John Gabriel Borkman* the “most powerful winter landscape in all of Scandinavian art” (Much cited in Helland 2000:293). With the snow swirling in the night outside, the lone villa evokes the same uncanny feelings of the lone family estates from the nineteenth-century Victorian gothic literature. The Rentheim family estate in Ibsen’s drama has many parallels with the Thornfield manor in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. Both houses are similarly buried in a menacing silence. In the old, faded furnishing with withered elegance the relations between the inhabitants are uncongenial and alienating. The sounds, voices, light, colors, are meticulously kept subdued.

All the pieces of furniture appear to be purposefully aiming at suffocating any possibility of vivid colors or gay sounds. There is a “heavy curtain” on the window to block the light, a thick cloth on the table, sofa is covered with a horse-hair blanket, the light from the lamp is dimmed by a shade: Mrs. Borkman’s living room gives an impression of a sound- and light-proof studio. Silence and darkness of the lone estate seem eternal. The interior of Borkman’s dwelling on the upper-floor of the mansion, albeit considerably less elaborate, is maybe even to a greater extent dark, dim and dreary. The heavy, outdated furniture and the faded tapestries show the odd lack of colors in the salon. What is more, since it has no windows, the entire grand salon is lit solely from the right by lamps, leaving the rest of the space dim, with heavy shadows.

Such an interior is, according to Walter Benjamin, best suitable for a corpse (1993:3). Indeed, the inhabitants of this somber mansion, including the arriving Ella Rentheim all possess the characteristics which connect them more to the supernatural world of the dead than to the world of the living. Gunhild Borkman sitting in the living room, has, to such an extent, blended in her surroundings, that she seems more like a dead piece of the drawing-room furniture, than a living human being:

She is an elderly woman, cold and distinguished in appearance, with a stiff bearing and impassive features. Her hair has turned iron-gray; her hands are delicate and translucent. She wears a thick, dark, silk dress that once was stylish, but now is somewhat frayed and worn, and a woolen shawl over her shoulders. (Ibsen 1978:943)

She “sits erect and immobile at her crocheting” for a short while (ibid.) in the sound- and light-proof chamber. Ella Rentheim “resembles her sister in appearance” with thick, “silvery white hair” dressed in black velvet (944). Likewise, the old Borkman’s “appearance is distinguished, with a finely chiseled profile”, his hair and beard are “grayish-white” and he is wearing “a black, somewhat old-fashioned suit, with a white necktie” (967). The white-haired, translucent trio all clad in black, irresistibly brings to mind another piece of Victorian horror fiction: Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, published a year after *John Gabriel Borkman* (1897). The German theatre director Sebastian Neubling masterly draws on this parallelism in his 2001 production of the play (Carlson 2004: 64-65).

Indeed, the image of vampirism seems to fit astonishingly well with the gestures, clothing and behavior of the old trio in the haunted Rentheim mansion where the constant sound of creaking planks under the footsteps of Borkman which go “up and down. Back and forth. From morning to night. Day in and day out” (Ibsen 1978:950). It seems that nothing could break this purposefully nurtured lifeless silence – awake the Rentheim mansion from its eternal slumber. The lifeless body on stage in the opening of the drama is, however, brought to life. It is a metaphoric life-bringing *sound*.

5.3. THE PIANO AS DRAMATIC TOOL: THE ORCHESTRATION OF *JOHN GABRIEL BORKMAN*

Sæther has offered a new perspective on this drama, concentrating on the play’s *auditory* elements, which, according to the critic, create an independent layer, a sub-text equally important as the visual and verbal ones (1993). “Klavermusikken, tonene, skrittene, hammerslagene, ringingen, hele lydregisteret spilles ut til en mangfoldig symfoni som også blir meningsbærende i kraft av det lydlige assosieres med glede, lyst, død, sorg, hat, kjærlighet, drøm, virkelighet”, finds Sæther (1993:36).

Drawing on this article, I will inquire into the structural importance of the auditory elements in the play in general, with a subsequent focus on the piano music as the central element in the play’s “symphony of sounds”. Seen separately, *sounds* in *John Gabriel*

Borkman might not seem important. However, as Sæther suggests, they do create a systematized whole.

Throughout the drama, the hearing sense seems to constantly be the privileged one. The insistence on the *auditory* has perhaps one of its most striking examples in the first conversation between the sisters Ella and Gunhild:

ELLA: Well – Gunhild, it’s nearly eight years now since we saw each other last.
MRS. BORKMAN (*coldly*): Or since we’ve spoken, at any rate.
ELLA: Since we’ve spoken; yes, that’s better.
[---]
MRS. BORKMAN: [...] [T]he last time we *spoke* together – that was here in this room– (Ibsen 1978:945)

First of all, principally by means of *sounds* in the play, Ibsen creates the overall feeling of eeriness in the drama. The opposition between *silence* and words or sounds (mostly whispers), is remarkably intense, as seen in the dialogue above.

Further, the uncanny communication between Borkman and Gunhild foregoes uniquely by means of sounds. Borkman has in the eight years never set foot in Gunhild’s room, nor has she ever come up to see him. However, they have all the while been aware of each other’s presence:

MRS. BORKMAN. Always hearing his footsteps up there. From early morning till far into the night. And so loud, as if they were here in this room.
ELLA. Yes, it’s strange how the sound carries.
MRS. BORKMAN. [...] (*Listens, then whispers.*) Hear that, Ella! Listen! Back and forth – back and forth, the wolf pacing. (951)

The beginning of the fourth act is almost entirely an auditory “image”. Standing motionless on the steps of the house, the three characters discuss whether Gunhild should “call out for Erhart” or remain silent. However, they quickly hush one another, and *listen* attentively to the silver bells on Mrs. Fanny Wilton’s sleigh as they pass by the property of the mansion, discussing about the metaphoric of the sound.²⁸

In his 2006 article “*John Gabriel Borkman’s* Avant-Garde Continuity”, Sandberg minutely examines what he finds to be Ibsen’s carefully worked out “continuity devices” at the end of each act. The critic recognizes elements in the drama which resemble what were later to become common cinematic techniques known as: “sound bridge”, “cross-cutting” and the “doorway” technique. “In each of the seams between acts,” the critic finds, “there is a clear attempt to move to a new space without losing track of time or gesture” (333). The

²⁸ See the subtitle “The Sound of Bells at Midnight” in chapter 5.4. of this thesis, 78.

play's "sound bridge" is, according to Sandberg, Frida Foldal's performance of the *Dance Macabre* on the piano linking the first and second acts, achieving a "convincing visual mobility" between the acts (331). Sandberg is, to my knowledge, the only Ibsen critic to, no matter how briefly, account for the piano music as a structural dramatic tool. I will hereby also focus most on the piano music as the principal auditory element in the play. Nevertheless, I will expand the focus to the sound effects in general, and analyze the role they have as Ibsen's formal devices within the structure of *John Gabriel Borkman*.

Nearly every development in the dramatic action is either preceded or directly caused by sounds. The play opens, as mentioned earlier, with a scene, or tableau, deprived of any motion or activity. Mrs. Borkman, an "elderly woman, cold and distinguished in appearance" all clad in black "*sits erect and immobile at her crocheting for a short while*" in a faded, semi-lit living room (Ibsen 1978:943). The reader can imagine the silence in the room: only the fire cracking in the somber room, the subdued howl of the snowstorm from the outside, and possibly Borkman's heavy steps on the ceiling are heard, echoing and reverberating through the otherwise deathly silent house. "*Then from the outside comes the sound of a passing sleigh. She listens, her eyes lighting up with joy*" (ibid.). Bells on a passing sleigh make an incision in the grim still-life. This sound infuses life into the immobile body. The merry high-pitched bells from the outside are echoed by "*an involuntary whisper*" (my italics) from the inside of the house: "Erhart! At last!" Thereafter, "life" and action in the play starts. Mrs. Borkman "*rises and gazes out through the curtains*" (ibid.).

This is the first instance of Ibsen's peculiar technique, or "continuity devices" (Sandberg 2006:333). This method is repeated throughout the play, linking the scenes, or abruptly cutting them. The examples are many. In the first act, Ella interrupts Gunhild, shifting the focus of the conversation to the hearing sense: "ELLA (*listening*). Is someone coming? I think I hear— " (Ibsen 1978:959). Again, in the second act, Ella's appearance in Borkman's salon is announced by: "a knock [...] heard on the tapestry door" (980). Ibsen uses this lack of sounds as a brilliant means of heightening the suspense, Borkman's question "Who is that?" is met with silence, cryptically answered by a second knock on the invisible door in the dimly lit salon. In the third act, the heated quarrel between the three aged characters is brusquely interrupted by a sound: "MRS. BORKMAN (*Abruptly listens, then cries.*). There I hear him! He's here – he's here! Erhart!" (1000).

Clinging bells on passing sleighs, footsteps on the ceiling, but the absence of sounds, have an important role in the drama. Those are elements which create suspense and the gothic atmosphere in the play and further mark the progress or breaks in the action. However, the most gripping, and metaphorically superior among this multitude of structurally important auditory elements in the play is unquestionably the *Dance Macabre*. The sound of the piano music from Borkman's upstairs makes an incision in the action revolving in the downstairs quarters of the villa. The already tense relations between the characters now snap. Upon hearing the *Danse Macabre*, they react passionately – young Erhart storms out saying: “Yes, it's that music *there* – that's what's hounding me out of this house” (966). As the “*music swells in sound from overhead*” Mrs. Borkman “([...] *hurls herself down on the floor, writhing and moaning and whispers in anguish*): Erhart! Erhart –” (ibid.).

The *Dance Macabre*, played by Frida Foldal, is a seam between the acts which also binds to disparate spaces. The piano music is a specific dramatic tool which creates an impression of continuity, an even flow of time. Also, it functions as a “bridge” creating a smooth transition between the two interior spaces which are emphatically strictly kept apart, as Sandberg has observed. At this point in the text, while the attention of the reader moves from Mrs. Borkman's downstairs living-room to Borkman's upstairs, Frida is heard playing the *Danse Macabre*. The second act opens apparently at the very same moment when the action downstairs has ended: Frida is playing “*the last measures of the Danse Macabre*.”²⁹ The music soon comes to an end and is followed by silence.

Could this “auditory curtain” between the acts be interpreted as a relief in the dramatic action as we know it from other theatrical genres from Ibsen's time, the melodrama and the vaudeville?³⁰ If so, the *Danse Macabre* would be a means by which Ibsen intended to fill the necessary intermission during the change of setting for the two acts in theatres. However, this is a hardly the case, since the *Danse Macabre* is, unlike such musical interludes in the nineteenth-century theatres, an integral part of the drama. Second, it could hardly be called a “relief” since it, quite to the contrary, intensifies the dramatic suspense.

Indeed, in the particular moment in the play when the massive grand piano in Borkman's salon becomes animated, its “voice” is heard louder than any other sounds, reverberating through the dark rooms of the Rentheim mansion with the most menacing and

²⁹ As a side note, Vigdis Ystad has suggested that perhaps a temporal overlap is implied at this point (1997:58). That might also be possible, although the text gives no definite indications to that.

³⁰ See chapter 1 “Music in Ibsen”.

bone-chilling tones a piano has in all of Ibsen's work. The dreary silence, the howling of the wind, shrieking planks from the upstairs and the chilling musical piece played on the piano are essential means by which Ibsen suggests that the house possesses a morbid similarity to a tomb, where the inhabitants, as is only appropriate for "the dead's resting place" speak in silent whispers, constantly hushing each other and listening attentively to some signs of life. The piano in Borkman's salon and the dance music it produces attain the most bone-chilling imagery in the whole Ibsen's work. When the piano in *John Gabriel Borkman* is adorned with a "voice", it not coincidentally, "speaks" of death. The dance music that swells through this bourgeois home is the *Danse Macabre* – the Dance of Death.

5.4. DANSE MACABRE

The *Danse Macabre* is played in the end of the first act of the drama and lasts until some time in the second. It starts while the action is still set in Mrs. Borkman's living-room, interrupting the emotionally tense dialogue between Mrs. Borkman, her twin sister Ella Rentheim and her son Erhart Borkman. The relation between the three is a peculiar one, which a brief summery of the plot will give insight into.

Ella Rentheim comes on that winter night to her family estate on a special errand. She has learned that she is soon to die, and her project is to ask the young Erhart Borkman, of whom she took care for five years after John Gabriel was sentenced to prison, to keep her company during her remaining months. She wants Erhart's "affections – his soul – his whole heart -!" (Ibsen 1978:957) as well as his parents' permission that he bears her surname. This enrages Gunhild, Erhart's mother, for she too claims "power" over Erhart, and has herself designed a project for him: "MRS. BORKMAN. Erhart has an obligation, before all else, to achieve a brilliance of such height and scope that not one person in this country will still recall the shadow his father cast over me – and over my son" (949). That night, the two sisters make a bet with the twenty three-year-old Erhart as the prize, promising to each other a "savage fight" over him. When Erhart enters the living room towards the end of the first act, the merciless fight between the sisters is intensified: "MRS. BORKMAN (*turns on her menacingly*). You want to tear him from me! ELLA (*rising*). Yes, Gunhild, if I only could". (965)

Suddenly: "[*m*]usic is heard overhead" (ibid.). Torn between the two women, with a third waiting for him at the ball, Erhart reacts wildly to this sound:

ERHART (*writhing as if in pain*): Oh, I can't take this anymore! (*He peers about him.*) Where'd I leave my hat? (*To ELLA.*) Do you know that music upstairs?

ELLA. No. What is it?

ERHART. It's the *Danse Macabre*. The Dance of Death. Don't you know the Dance of Death, Aunt Ella?

ELLA (*smiles sorrowfully*). Not yet, Erhart

ERHART (to MRS. BORKMAN). Mother – I appeal to you, please – do let me go!

(---)

ERHART. [...] it's that music there – that's what's hounding me out of this house.

(---)

(*The music swells in sound from overhead.*)

MRS. BORKMAN (stands quietly for a moment, gives a start, recoils and whispers involuntarily). The wolf howling again. The sick wolf. (*She stays standing a moment, then hurls herself down on the floor, writhing and moaning, and whispers in anguish.*) Erhart! Erhart – be true to me! Oh, come home and help your mother! I can't bear this life any longer! (965-966)

None of the characters think of this music as of a purely aesthetic phenomenon. Rather, reacting to its sounds intuitively and corporally, they interpret the *Danse Macabre* through the codes of its underlying metaphoric narrative.

Consequently, almost all Ibsen critics were prone to agree that *Danse Macabre* may be the play's underlying metaphor (Haakonsen 2003:238, Aslaksen 1994, Helland 2000, Aarseth 1999, Holtan 1970). Indeed, it is a metaphor for the death-dealing cosmos evoked in the play. The myth of the Dance of Death stems from the French folklore and was a well-known motif which appeared in literature, music and painting during the Middle Ages. According to James M. Clark:

By the Dance of Death we understand literary or artistic representations of a procession or dance, in which both the living and the dead take part. The dead may be portrayed by a number of figures, or by a single individual personifying Death. The living members are arranged in some kind of order or precedence (qtd. in Helland 2000:334).

The earliest representations of the Dance of Death depict a round dance or line dance, in which Death and skeletons representing all layers of the society are participating. In the early nineteenth century, the myth saw a serious revival. Facsimiles and cheap copies of Hans Holbein's paintings with this motif were widely distributed. This gave further rise to its countless contemporary versions in the graphic arts and popular literature. For instance, the young Gustav Flaubert wrote "La danse des morts" in 1838, and later used the same motif in *Madame Bovary* (Webster Goodwin 1986:205). The young Henrik Ibsen was also inspired by the medieval myth. Sometime before 1850 he wrote *Dødningeballet* (Ibsen 1937:48-50), a poem which really is a re-versification of Goethe and Heine (Helland 2000:336, Aslaksen 1993:79).

Further, in 1817 Franz Schubert composed *Der Tod und das Mädchen* and in 1874 Camille Saint-Saëns composed *Danse Macabre*. Ibsen's text never explicitly states which

version of the *Danse Macabre* Frida Foldal is playing. However, critics mostly agree that it is Saint-Saëns' version.³¹ Some biographical and historical data can strengthen this assumption.

According to Jens Arup Seip, at the time when Ibsen was writing *John Gabriel Borkman*, Camille Saint-Saëns' *Danse Macabre*, op. 40 was often played in Oslo (Ibsen 1937:17). It achieved great popularity also thanks to Franz Liszt's adaptation of the piece to the piano (Loesser 1954:424). Ibsen was also, at the time when he was writing the play, frequently meeting with the pianist Hildur Andersen.³² In his 1954 biography on Ibsen, Halvdan Koht finds that this friendship had an incomparable impact on the composition of *John Gabriel Borkman*:

Merkelig er det kor stort eit rom Ibsen gav til musikken i livet åt Borkman. For han var slett ikke musikalsk [...]. [Det er] først og fremst Hildur Andersen som i denne tida gjorde musikken levande for han. Den "Dance macabre" av Saint-Saëns som han let Borkman like å høre, den hadde han hørt Hildur spela. (1954:272)

From the interviews with Hildur's decedents, Bodil Nævdal has learned that the pianist played the piece for Ibsen many times (1996:12). Drawing on this, Nils Grinde furthers the idea that it was Andersen who instructed Ibsen of the motif of the Dance of Death (Grinde 2008). This is, however, hardly the case, since Ibsen had very good knowledge of the motif even prior to 1850, thus more than forty years before meeting Hildur, when he wrote *Dødningsballet*. Going any deeper into the discussion on what inspired Ibsen to use the *Danse Macabre* in *John Gabriel Borkman* is not the goal of my research. It remains, however, a fact that Ibsen purposefully uses this particular piece of music because of its rich symbolism into which I will inquire.

Borkman's Dance of Death

The Dance of Death came rather late in the process of the play's composition. In Ibsen's draft from August/September 1896, John Gabriel Borkman and Frida Foldal play together a "piece by Beethoven": "BORKMAN *stands by the piano in front of a music stand, playing the violin*. FRIDA FOLDAL *sits at the instrument and accompanies him*" (Ibsen 1977:333). In the final version of the play, completed only a few months after, the second act opens: "BORKMAN [...] *standing by the piano, his hands clasped behind his back, listening to FRIDA FOLDAL, who sits playing the last measures of the Danse Macabre*". We notice that

³¹ Helland 2000: 333-336, Grinde 2008: 337-341, Aslaksen 1194:77-83, 143-147.

³² Koht (1954), Nævdal (1996), Grinde (2008), Aasland (2006) et al.

once “a piece by Beethoven” was substituted by *Danse Macabre*, Borkman was no longer an active violin player but a passive listener. According to Aslaksen, Ibsen apparently sought to avoid a direct interpretation of Borkman as an allegory of death itself (1994). For, in the medieval myth of the *Danse Macabre*, death itself is playing this instrument as the corpses are dancing.

Det er mørk Nat. Døden kalder de døde op af deres Grave; de afblegede Skeletter rejser sig i deres Ligklæder og danser en uhyggelig Ringdans, mens Døden selv spiller Dansemelodien på sin Violin (Aslaksen 1994:77).

Even in the final version, Ibsen’s protagonist has still retained a strong connection to the underworld, the demonic, chthonic powers, but was, however, not reduced to a mere identification. The *Dance Macabre* is clearly Borkman’s attribute, as the grimmest grotesque of a dance, with its bone-chilling connotations awakens certain happiness in him. The image of dancing skeletons, awoken “slumbering spirits” horrifies the other characters. Whereas Erhart and Gunhild Borkman “writhe as in pain” upon hearing the *Danse Macabre*, John Gabriel Borkman associates its sounds with a most vivid memory from his childhood connected to happiness and freedom:

(*The music comes to an end. Silence.*)

BORKMAN. Can you guess where I first heard such music as this?

FRIDA (*looking up to him.*) No, Mr. Borkman.

BORKMAN. It was down in the mines.

FRIDA (*not understanding*). You did? In the mines?

BORKMAN. I’m a miner’s son, as I guess you know. Or maybe you didn’t know that?

FRIDA. No, Mr. Borkman.

BORKMAN. A miner’s son. And my father took me down with him sometimes, into the mines. Down there the metal sings.

FRIDA. Really, it sings?

BORKMAN (*nods*). When the ore is loosened. The hammer blows that loosen it – they’re like midnight bell that strikes and sets it free. And so the metal sings – for joy – in its way. (Ibsen 1978:967-968)

The *Danse Macabre* Frida plays is, thus, a re-figuration of this Borkman’s early childhood memory. Music of the piano mimics the hammer blows which magically loosen the ore, bringing it to life. In the French myth, the sound of bells magically gives life to the graveyard corpses. What were dead bodies in the myth, are in Borkman’s memory transposed into the ore and metals from the underground. In both cases a specific sound marks the hour when the dead awake from their slumber in the deeps, in order to dance “for joy – in their way”.

According to Helland, the protagonist’s project is “dødsdansens skremmende forveksling av liv og død” (2000:339). Within Borkman’s life call, continues Helland, the dead are magically animated with a new vitality. The dead gain vitality and life, whereas life and the living obtain the characteristics of its opposite: death.

Borkman har satt dødsdansens mekanisme igjennom i livet, han har foretrukket det liv som kunne skapes i det livløse: ikke den levende kvinnen, men det døde, stenen, malmen, pengene har vært i sentrum for hans troskap. [...] Den ensidige nedsenkingen i dødsdansens kortvarige oppvekking av det døde, ikke livsdansens gjensidighet, har vært hans anliggende. (Helland 2000:340)

The mythical background of the *Danse Macabre* can be first and foremost used as a key for the understanding of the play's protagonist – it is clearly *his* music. Borkman's life call included a particular Dance of Death: by aiming at giving life to “the slumbering captive spirits of the underworld”, he converted in return the living people around him into shadows. In the last act of the play, Borkman reveals his love towards the dead objects delivering a most poetic love speech to the metal and ore which constitute “his kingdom”, for which he had sold the love of a living woman, Ella, standing next to him. Converting her, and Gunhild, into capital for career advancement he “killed the life” in Ella, and turned the other woman into “a shadow”. Thus, the vitality of human beings is paradoxically sacrificed through the dialectics of what should be the most life-affirming process: dance. For, dance is, according to Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, the purest of all art forms, the most vital of all human activities.³³ The *Danse Macabre* from *John Gabriel Borkman* is, however, dance's most grotesque form: it is a dance of death and the dead, bringing death to the living, and vitality to the dead.

The *Danse Macabre* functions on yet another level in the drama. Besides being a metaphor for the protagonist's project, its dialectic is also be the entire play's underlying metaphor. I find clues in the text that point towards the possibility to read the whole drama as a peculiar version of the medieval myth of the *Danse Macabre*.

The Sound of Bells at Midnight

Let us go back again to the beginning of the drama. The action and “life” in the drama are set off by *sound*. In the chapter “The Piano as a Dramatic Tool” in this thesis (69) I have discussed its importance within the play's structure. Here, I will dwell on the metaphoric aspects of this dramatic tool. Important in this context is to observe that it is not any sound, but a sound of bells on a passing sleigh, on “*a winter evening*” where a “*snowstorm swirls*” (Ibsen 1978:941-943). This is not coincidental. According to the legend, it is precisely the sound of bells which starts the Dance of Death. Henri Cazalis' poem to which Saint-Saëns wrote the *Danse Macabre* begins as follows:

³³ Nietzsche 2008. For a further analysis of the Nietzschean aspects in the play see Sæther 2002

Le vent d'hiver souffle, et la nuit est sombre,
Des gémissements sortent des tilleuls;
Les squelettes blancs vont à travers l'ombre
Courant et sautant sous leurs grands linçeuls (Marion 3)

Likewise, Saint-Saëns begins his symphonic poem with sounds symbolizing church bells which animate the skeletons. Summoned up from their peaceful slumber, the undead start an uncanny waltz: its most grotesque imitation. The exact same paradigm of motifs is found in Ibsen's poem *Dødningsballet* (Ibsen 1937:48-50), to which Ibsen will come back again in his dramatic epilogue, *When We Dead Awaken* (1899). In the poem, the dead are summoned by the sound of church bells striking midnight. They perform a macabre dance but when the bells strike one, the skeletons return to their graves, finishing their existence of life-within-death:

Om smulrede Gravmonumenter
De dansede så lystingen rundt;
Men Gravene atter dem vente,
Een time er kun dem forundt.- (Ibsen 1973:50)

ObeYing the same occult principle, Mrs. Borkman, summoned from her slumber by ringing bells, awakes to start her macabre dance with one goal on mind: "MRS. BORKMAN [...]: Erhart! At last!" To this dance joins another "dead-who-lives", another shadow: Ella Rentheim. The trio of the undead circling around young Erhart is complete when John Gabriel Borkman also joins in.

Just like the dance that infuses them with life is a macabre travesty of the idea of dance, so is the vitality given through it a distorted one. The "life" which the three gain is, in fact, its somber imitation. Hence, they try to substantiate it through a living being, or more specifically Erhart Borkman. Ella Rentheim seeks to eternalize herself, and her family name through Erhart, Gunhild Borkman wants him to be a living "monument over [Borkman's] grave" (Ibsen 1978:999) and make her final reputation stainless. Lastly, Borkman articulates their blood-thirsty desire for life: "Erhart – would you go in with your father and help me win this new life?" (1004).

Repeating the paradigm of the myth, their macabre vampire dance terminates when the sound of bells is heard again. In the last act, the three "undead" characters: two shadows, and a dead man, as Ella Rentheim calls them at the very end of the play, stand on the porch of the house, *listening*:

MRS. BORKMAN (*Listens.*) Shh! What's that?
ELLA (*also listening*): That sounds like sleigh bells –
(---)

ELLA (*hurriedly*): Gunhild, if you want to call to him, do it *now*! Maybe he still might – (*The sleigh bells sound close at hand within the woods.*) Quick, Gunhild! They're down there below us right now!
 MRS. BORKMAN (*stands indecisively a moment; then stiffens, hard and cold*): No, I won't cry after him...
 (*The sound fades in the distance.*)
 ELLA (*after a moment*): You can't hear them anymore.
 MRS. BORKMAN: To me they sounded like funeral bells (Ibsen 1978:1012).

The bells of the departing sleigh can be interpreted as a reformulation of the church bells which strike one calling the dead back to their graves, signaling the ending of the *Danse Macabre*. Indeed, as the “funeral bells” fade away in the distance, the three characters are bound up to return inside, to their graves. However, Borkman refuses to go back to his death-chamber:

BORKMAN. Under a roof for the last time! [...] If I went up to the salon now, the walls would close in and crush me – grind me flat as a fly.
 ELLA. But where will you go?
 BORKMAN. Just walk and walk and walk. See if I can win my way through to freedom, and *life* (my italics), and people again.
 (---)
 ELLA. It's your health I'm worried about.
 BORKMAN (*with a laugh*). A dead man's health! I have to laugh at you, Ella! (Ibsen 1978:1018-1019)

Borkman will not “rest quietly where he lay” (1019). Refusing to return to his “life” he attempts to repeat the rhythmical magic dance-formula: “just walk and walk and walk” hoping that this would win life back to him. He takes Ella, as his partner in the dance, to accompany him up through the trees.

BORKMAN (*proceeds farther.*) Come on!
 (---)
 ELLA'S VOICE (*heard from the trees, right.*). Where are we going, John? I don't know where this is.
 BORKMAN'S VOICE (*higher up.*) Keep following my footprints in the snow. (ibid.)

Imitating the movements of the ritual dance of the *Danse Macabre* which has brought them to life, the two characters climb up, away from the house, in a fruitless effort to regain vitality. However, that proves to be impossible, since the death bells have already struck one and they are bound to return to their graves. The ritual of *Danse Macabre* that has for a brief moment brought them to life is over.

In his analysis of Ibsen's last plays, Orley I. Holtan concludes that: “the world of [*John Gabriel Borkman*] is one in which only desolation rules. The cosmos presented is either dead or ultimately death-dealing” (1970:154). However, there is a clear antithesis in the text to the old trio's deathly imitation of life. It is expressed in what Brian Johnston calls the play's “Southern trio” (1989:235-278).

The Dance of Death versus the Dance of Life

ERHART. There are so many shimmering lights down there. And young, happy faces. And there's music there, Mother!

MRS. BORKMAN (*pointing up toward the ceiling*). Upstairs there's also music, Erhart (Ibsen 1978:965)

There are two dances in *John Gabriel Borkman*. In them and through them, Ibsen juxtaposes the dance's inherent notion of vitality with its opposite: death. The first is the *Danse Macabre* played regularly at the house of Borkmans. The other one is played in the house of the Hinkels. The first one is, both literally and metaphorically, a Dance of Death, whereas the other could be called the Dance of Life. They are both waltzes and ironically enough, are both played by the same pianist: Frida Foldal.

The first dance, as discussed in the previous chapter, is intrinsically connected to the older generation and their vampire-like project to revivify from the dead. As such, the Dance of Death in which the old Borkman, his wife and Ella Rentheim participate in is a most morbid grotesque of the idea of dance. Their dance, as is inherent in the paradox which is its name, is an utter opposition to dance as a glorification of youth and life. It is the dance of skeletons, instead of "young happy faces". The "music" that Gunhild Borkman is referring to is in fact a death-dealing and death-bringing travesty of waltz. Therefore Erhart, trying to break free from the macabre dance spun around him, exclaims in frenzy that the *Danse Macabre* is in fact music, but: "it's that music there – that's what's hounding me out of this house" (966).

On the contrary, the dance in which he earnestly longs to participate is Mrs. Fanny Wilton's dance. Astrid Sæther observes: "[h]os Fanny spilles det ingen dødsmesse" – one doesn't play a death mass at Fanny's (1993:31): the *Danse Macabre* which "is hounding [Erhart] out of the house" is opposed to the joyful life-loving dancing with Fanny. As much as the *Danse Macabre* is a metaphor for death, so is Fanny's dance at Hinkel's the metaphor of unbound vitality. Fanny offers Erhart a life full of "gay, amusing, hospitable people", a place lit with shimmering lights, "teeming with young ladies" (Ibsen 1978:961). How different this is from the Borkman's dance: the world of darkness, whispers, stern, worn out faces. In his unappeased hunger for vitality, Erhart chooses Fanny's dance instead of the Dance of Death: "ERHART (*in a blaze of emotion*). I'm young! I want my chance to live, for once! [...] Just live, live, live!" (1004).

Ever since the text introduces the character of Fanny Wilton's character in the second act, she is, like a nymph, using a magical formula calling Erhart to take part in her dance:

MRS. WILTON. I'll say: 'Put on your overcoat nicely, Erhart Borkman. And the galoshes! Don't forget your galoshes! And then follow after me! Come away. Come away. [...] Come away! Come away! Good night. (Ibsen 1978:962)

This rhythmical invitation to dance, so reminiscent of the calls of the three amorous dairy-maids in *Peer Gynt*, is Fanny Wilton's spell: "Come away! Come away". By choosing to follow Fanny's dance southwards, Erhart utterly gives himself to the Dionysian conception of vitality. It is the short-term moment of lust, sexuality and eroticism unleashed, which Erhart can only describe with the word happiness: "[t]he greatest, loveliest happiness of life. I can't tell you more than that" (1005).

Breaking free from the three "living dead", Erhart leaves in the company of Mrs. Fanny Wilton and Frida Foldal, her protégé. This moment in the play has often been considered to be the drama's central peripetia, the climax (Aarseth 1999:318, Young 1989:190). Indeed, it is the moment when finally the play's underlying metaphor comes to an end. The silver bells on Fanny Wilton's sleigh ringing in the night mark the ending of the *Danse Macabre* which, for a brief hour magically revived the macabre Rentheim mansion.

Ella Rentheim pensively concludes that the silver bells ring like funeral bells for them, taking away Erhart, who represented the only thing which might have given them a prolonged moment of life. For Erhart, however, "they could be ringing in life and happiness" (Ibsen 1978:1012). Brian Johnston finds that the sound of bells marks a struggle of life versus death: "the sound of bells signals the escape of Erhart and his companions south converting the metallic death forces of Borkman into the life force of Mrs. Wilton" (Johnston 1975:146). However, many critics find that the Erhart-Fanny-Frida Dionysian project can hardly be seen as a positive alternative to the *Danse Macabre*.³⁴ Holtan might, again, offer the most radical interpretation: "[i]t is difficult to accept Erhart Borkman and Fanny Wilton as symbols of the way life ought to be lived. [...] Youth may, however, be literally hell-bent – rushing to its own destruction" (1970:152). As a result, the critic concludes that in *John Gabriel Borkman* "[a]ll alternatives for human happiness seem closed, or at least highly doubtful" (ibid.).

However, I believe that there are clues in the text that ask for a reassessment of this standpoint. The text does offer a positive alternative to the desolate "life", but it may not be in the character of Erhart Borkman. Art, and more specifically music, can be a utopian way to

³⁴ Ystad 1997:58, and Aslaksen 1993:113

happiness, as it is suggested in the usually overlooked character of Frida Foldal. Again, the complex motif of piano and piano music comes into the foreground, this time not as a menacing source of death-bringing music, or the protagonist's symbol of atemporal life-illusion, but as a possibility for a better life.

The Piano: Utopian Cure for Social Ills

Roland Barthes has suggested that "every character (even secondary) is the hero of his own sequence" (1977:106). However, Frida Foldal's part in the play seems to have been surprisingly omitted from the criticism concerning this drama. Her role is, albeit low-key, indeed significant for my analysis of the piano in Ibsen.³⁵

Frida Foldal is the daughter of a rather comical petty clerk – Wilhelm Foldal who is sometimes interpreted as the latter's mirror-image (Helland 2000:314). Her father was among the ones who had "lost everything he had" when the bank failed, and she has been subsequently taken in by Mrs. Fanny Wilton as her protégé. It is Erhart who arranged for that:

MRS. BORKMAN. Erhart has amply compensated for any pittance he [Foldal] may have lost.

ELLA (*surprised*). Erhart? How has he managed that?

MRS. BORKMAN. He's been looking after Foldal's younger daughter. And helping to educate her – so she can make something of herself and be independent someday. [---] And then Erhart's arranged music lessons for her. (Ibsen 1978:953)

"She's already so practiced", continues Mrs. Borkman, "that she can go up – up to him in the salon and play for him" on the piano which Ella Rentheim sent out for her nephew. It is while playing the *Danse Macabre* on this very piano that the text introduces her character: "FRIDA FOLDAL is a good-looking pale girl of fifteen, with a rather tired, strained expression; she wears a cheap, light-colored dress" (967).

The fragile Frida is almost engulfed in the darkness of the massive body of the piano, extended in the black figure of Borkman, which menacingly looms over her. With the lights of a few lamps coming from the far side of the room, the text suggests an image of a black-and-white trio frozen in silence after an overwhelming wave of sounds. With her paleness, and light-colored dress, Frida stands conspicuously out, a little light-source within the dreary, dark, windowless capsule.

³⁵ Astrid Sæther is one of the few critics to dedicate some attention to the character of Frida Foldal in the context of the role of art and music in *John Gabriel Borkman* (1993:36).

It is very interesting to note that Frida, the pianist, is the only character in the haunted mansion which remains unaffected by the *Danse Macabre*. The sounds of her piano-playing prompt Borkman to one of his most poetic speeches, comparing her music with the singing of the metal. To Borkman's emotionally intense, profound words, Frida simply retorts: "Really? It sings" (968). Rather than pointing to the comical aspects of this scene (Helland 2000:338), I wish to emphasize that it juxtaposes Borkman's idealistic and metaphysical negation of time and fascination with the world of dead objects, to a rational, future-bound, positive, youth incarnated in Frida Foldal.

Unlike the old Borkman, who has experienced a social and financial downfall, Frida is climbing up the social ladder. Frida has already performed a great social leap by receiving instruction in piano-playing. This has given her access into the world of the "kondisjonerte", admittedly only as a passive observer for the moment. Her greatest sorrow is that she may not participate in the dance of all the young girls at Hinkel's.

However, the pragmatic Frida clearly understands that her talent may be a source of income:

BORKMAN (*stands, looking at her*). Do you like to play for dances? Around in different houses?

FRIDA (*putting on her winter coat*). Yes, when I can get an engagement – It always brings in a little something. (968)

The piano, and piano music are her *capital* which will eventually bring about advancement on the social ladder, taking her away from her current identity, both metaphorically speaking and literally. She is on the sleigh taking her, Erhart and Mrs. Wilton southwards. The motives why she is taken on this trip are manifold, and admittedly not entirely in Frida's favor. The girl will, namely, serve as someone the young Borkman will have to "fall back on" when the he and Fanny have finished with each other. However, for Frida this trip means that she will get the chance to "go abroad and develop her music" (Ibsen 1978:1008), that is, develop her self.

According to Hildebrand Dieter, music, and especially piano music, was a field particularly suitable for a fast advancement in the society:

De sidste to årtier af det 19. århundrede vrimler det formelig med "de største" pianister, og publikums begejstring bliver ligefrem frenetisk. Klaveret er på toppen af sin udvikling, sit renommé, sin klang, sin distribusjon, og hærskarer af pianister erhverver sig velvilje, verdensry (og ofte også en formue) fra den ene dag til den anden (Dieter 1992:217)

In the period when Ibsen was writing *John Gabriel Borkman*, art presented a rare possibility for a woman to earn her own money, and live an independent life. This is a recurrent motif in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fiction, to take Cora Sandel's novel *Alberte og*

Jakob (1926) as one example. In this period, literature was specifically interested in the problematics of gender, often centering on the spiritual struggles of inarticulate and isolated women. Indeed, rather than discussing whether Hildur Andersen introduced the *Danse Macabre* to Ibsen, her influence on the composition of the drama may be sought for in the character of Frida Foldal. Andersen, a brilliant Norwegian pianist who managed to support herself of her music, might have served as Ibsen's role-model for the character of Frida.

Ibsen's text, thus, opens up for the possibility that music, and in this case, specifically piano music, may be the only positive alternative. It represents a third option among the life- or life-imitating projects in *John Gabriel Borkman*. Frida Foldal seems to be the only future-bound character. However, if we now observe the whole *cycle* of Ibsen's plays where piano and piano music have a prominent role and have been the subject for my thesis, we see a clear development. Frida Foldal stands in line with Nora and Hedda Gabler, closing the cycle of Ibsen's female characters who turn to the piano as a supposed "way out" of their contemporary existence. For Frida's two predecessors the piano is their companion, or prosthetic voice, in the moments of acute voicelessness within their (imposed) gendered identities. Frida's relationship with the piano is much more rational and productive, and through it Frida positively transgresses her (gendered) circumstances.

I will end this analysis with a comparison of the pianists in Ibsen. When Ibsen's heroine closes the door of the bourgeois salon shut behind her in 1876, she is unconscious of what her next move will be in the society she only then has to confront, vaguely searching for an identity. It is exactly by trying to recover her upper-class identity that the other Ibsen's heroine turns to the piano, radically and theatrically breaking all the rules of bourgeoisie in 1890. The little Frida Foldal, however, is the only of the three women trapped in their gender, who in 1899 actually *finds* identity by means of the piano. Unlike Hedda who does not have the possibility to use her talent, her artistic nature, as a constructive solution, Frida Foldal has this possibility. Her transgression of the socio-cultural boundaries set for a woman is positive and real, whereas Hedda's is negative and metaphoric. Frida Foldal can be seen as an epilogue of the cycle, finishing what Nora's slamming of the door has started. The struggle of Ibsen's women to break away from the bourgeois gender restraints finally proves possible in the end

of the century; the piano – the very epitome of these restraints is paradoxically suggested to be also their only way out.

6. CONCLUSION

When discussing *A Doll House*, Durbach concludes that: “Ibsen’s realism makes extraordinary demands from the reader”, since she has to be the “director, designer of set and costumes, choreographer, properties person, and musician” in order to grasp the drama’s full meaning (1991:41). Indeed, in Ibsen’s drama even an understated object such as the piano rises above its primordial simplicity and innocence and demands from us to employ an interdisciplinary approach in order to fully understand its significance. This essentially “mute” object which decorates the Ibsen’s characters’ interior, suddenly gains a “voice”, at once metaphoric and literal. The piano is not a mute object in Ibsen. It possesses its own narrative, which the dramatist fully relies on in the composition of his dramas. The fantastic transformation of the piano – the transformation of an innocent piece of furniture into a dramatic tool and a charged site of cultural struggle – has been central in my analyses of Ibsen’s dramas.

A Doll House, *Hedda Gabler* and *John Gabriel Borkman* deal, among other things, with the problems of an individual within society, which literally develop around this instrument. The replacement of the human voice from the early dramas with the piano as the dominant source of music in his later dramas is Ibsen’s purposeful device. It marks the playwright’s radical shift from writing historic dramas, towards contemporary subject-matter. By connecting his protagonists with the piano, and putting them in interaction with it, Ibsen gives to the reader a subtle but clear insight into not only their personalities, background, social position and current emotional state, but also the cultural, aesthetic and historical aspects of the whole society.

In Ibsen’s time, the piano was considered to be the “bourgeois instrument” par excellence, a powerful cultural signifier, a “badge of purse-pride”, as Arthur Loesser calls it. Common ideologies, socio-cultural codes, beliefs and myths of the bourgeoisie, this nineteenth-century “elite”, are interwoven in the network of the piano’s metaphoric meanings. For the families who owned the piano, it was a way to “show-off” their wealth and cultural superiority. Any respectable household was obliged to possess it. Even though the owners might only be able to play a few light tunes on it, the grand fortepiano stood as an aesthetic artifact above all others. As such, the piano was most commonly found in the lavishly furnished salons, where the gaze of the guests could rest on its elegant curves. Therefore,

grand pianos were considerably more favored compared to small upright pianos. Appearances mattered most.

This is one of the reasons why the piano fits so naturally in the bourgeois salons of the Ibsen's plays. The Helmer, Tesman and Borkman families are all Norwegian nineteenth-century bourgeois families, their parlors naturally equipped with the piano. However, *A Doll House* was written in 1879, *Hedda Gabler* in 1890 and *John Gabriel Borkman* in 1896. The three dramas are written within seventeen-years of a culturally and aesthetically rapidly transforming period. In the 1870s the bourgeoisie was in the process of establishing itself as the leading social stratum, and already in the 1890s, its negative aspects were becoming apparent. This progression is reflected in the gradual change from realism to *fin de siècle* literature, and it is also apparent in the three dramas in question. As such, the three dramas form a specific cycle in Ibsen's oeuvre, where the motif of the piano and piano music thematically evolves, mirroring the development of the age's aesthetic climate.

The piano is found in three very different salons. In *A Doll House*, it is, like every detail of the furnishing, accounting for the family's impeccable bourgeois respectability. Nora "twitters" about it, oblivious of the fact that in such a "doll house" she lacks a true identity. As she dances the tarantella, she is constantly aware of the limits of her gender, and the bourgeois norms of fine manners. Her tarantella is on the verge of acceptable behavior for a married woman, and when it starts getting out of control, it is abruptly stopped. The piano and its music are means by which Nora tries to ritually "step out" of her existence. Nora strives to "cure" herself from her imposed gendered identity with the music of the piano which is, paradoxically enough, the epitome of her gender restraints. Therefore, her "rite of passage" from the bourgeois parlor does not occur in this interaction. The real break with the rules of the "sweet" bourgeois home, happens only some time after, but, nevertheless, it *does* happen. *A Doll House* ends with a positive hope that a "true life", a "true identity" is possible. It may be found under radically changed circumstances – in a "salon" which must be, however, based on different premises.

In *Hedda Gabler*, there is no hope for change. The "salon", that is, Hedda's circumstances, cannot be improved, no matter how hard one tries. In it, one is entrapped within the stale smell of "lavender and roses", without the possibility of escape. The piano, the dignified symbol of elite culture, simply "does not belong" with the rest of the "ridiculous and vile" furnishing. As much as Hedda's piano can not fit into the salon decorated by the

“caring” Aunt Julie, unless it is turned into a stand for flowers, so can Hedda not fit into it unless she embraces the petty bourgeois ideology. As we know, Hedda decides to move the piano out from the salon.

Ibsen orchestrates Hedda’s and Nora’s inner rupture with the help of piano music. Like in *A Doll House*, the piano becomes the “seismograph” of the heroine’s soul. However, Hedda and the piano have a more intimate relationship. The piano is Hedda’s direct link to the identity she longs to go back to, but it is also her metaphoric “twin figure”. Both of the protagonist and her piano are objects of exchange between men, as well as signs of their prosperity. It is Hedda’s companion in her illusions and wants, her dreams and lusts, as well as an indicator of her grandeur and fall. In the Tesman salon, the piano and Hedda suffer together. “My old piano”, mourns Hedda over spilt time, and the miserable marriage she “has stumbled into”. *Hedda Gabler* ends with a shot in the closed sanctuary the protagonist has constructed for herself. Thus, unlike in *A Doll House*, the possibility of escaping the bourgeois salon towards a better, truer future does not exist. The playwright shows a clear disillusionment in the bourgeois ways: a metaphoric victory, a spiritual transcendence of the grips “of the salon” is possible, but only through life’s radical negation, through death.

In *John Gabriel Borkman* the piano is also one of the few companions that the protagonist takes to his “Elba”, his self-imposed prison – the salon without windows. They are both stranded in a space where time seems to have been deliberately stopped. For Borkman, the piano is performing the same function as his other “friends”: it is *useful*. It serves as a means by which the protagonist stages his atemporal identity of the great bank manager to whom everybody bowed “as if to a king”. The massive grand piano in the otherwise empty salon is promptly waiting for the right visitor who would acknowledge this identity.

The salon in *John Gabriel Borkman* is the image of a bourgeoisie finally dissolved. It is perceived by the young generation as a place which generates death, as it flees away from the site of death, away from the indoors, away from the salon away from the outstretched arms of its vampire-like inhabitants exclaiming in a blaze of emotions: “Just live! Live! Live!” (Ibsen 1978:1004). Therefore, it is no wonder that once the piano music sounds in this drama, it sounds of death.

Like in the two preceding dramas, the music played on the piano in *John Gabriel Borkman* is a dance. Further, in all three dramas, dance music is inextricably linked to death.

Music and dance are, according to the nineteenth-century thought, utter life-affirming acts, the ultimate ways of human expression Ibsen, thus, fuses together with death – the very negation of life. In *A Doll House*, Nora dances the tarantella which is traditionally performed by a person dying of spider poison. Nora's tarantella is a dance by which she ritually attempts to, metaphorically speaking, dispose of her old self, and transcend into a new identity. In *Hedda Gabler*, the "wild dance tune" is a musical accompaniment to Hedda's ritualistic self-sacrifice, and mental escape. The *Danse Macabre* in *John Gabriel Borkman* is a piano waltz whose mechanism brings the old characters to life. It is a metaphor for their *rigor mortis*, their last spasmodic moments of life, before they return to their silent "graves", failing to attain a longer-lasting vitality.

At the same time, we observe that the piano music in all these instances presents a *utopian* attempt of the characters to transcend their ongoing existence. However, except in Frida Foldal's case, for whom piano really is a pragmatic "way out", this remains only an attempt. This notion brings Ibsen in line with other major literary works from this epoch which use this motif essentially in the same way.

In literature already from the beginning of the century, the piano has figured as the epicenter of social conflicts. In Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) the piano is a monument of vanity, and a hallmark of social superiority. Emma Bovary from Gustav Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857) shares strikingly many similarities with Ibsen's Hedda Gabler, both escaping from the banalities and emptiness of their marriage by playing the piano. The protagonist of Leo Tolstoy's *Kreuzer-sonata* (1889), Pozdnyshev, blaming piano music for his wife's adultery, kills the wife in a blind jealous rage while she is playing the piano. In Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* (1901), Hanno expresses his unfulfilled erotic passion through a piano piece. His performance mimics a sexual act to every last detail, disposing Hanno's inappropriate lust to others. Thus, as Alisa Clapp-Itnyre finds in her comprehensive study of the role of music in Victorian literature, and more specifically piano music: "[n]ineteenth-century novels [are] brimming with scenes at the piano" (2002:xv). In Victorian literature, or more specifically, the novels of Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy, piano music is at once "a transcendent corrective to social ills and as a subversive cause of those ills", concludes Clapp-Itnyre (vii). This is also true for the ambiguous nature of Ibsen's piano. Music is for his female protagonists both an oppressive cultural force and an expressive, creative outlet.

In Ibsen's cycle: *A Doll House*, *Hedda Gabler* and *John Gabriel Borkman* the "scenes at the piano" develop from Nora's death-dealing dance in the "sweet home" to the piano's grotesque epilogue, *Danse Macabre*, in Borkman's desolate room. In my analyses of Ibsen's dramas, I have strived to recover the age's pervasive ambiguousness underlying the instances when his characters interact with the piano, thus yet again acknowledging Ibsen's place within the nineteenth-century literature centering on music as a powerful metaphor. Piano music in Ibsen is not an ephemeral motif, but a testimony of the dramatist's poetic greatness and his sensitive insight into the complexity of his time.

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